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To cite this article: Taina Schneider, Harri Raisio, Anniina Tirronen & Harri Jalonen (12 Jun 2026): Co-creation in commissioning complex public services: towards an adaptive system for continuous improvement, Public Management Review, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2026.2686412](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2026.2686412)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2026.2686412>



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Co-creation in commissioning complex public services: towards an adaptive system for continuous improvement

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ABSTRACT


This article explores co-creation to address complex societal problems in the interconnected domains of health, welfare, and security. An instrumental case study examines the innovative outcome-based commissioning of public services for people engaging in problematic drug use in a Finnish city. We apply abductive content analysis to interviews with public and private stakeholders, documents, and statistics gathered from 2015 to 2021. The findings suggest that co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction combine to form an adaptive system that can foster continuous improvement in the provision of public value.


ARTICLE HISTORY Received 23 March 2025; Accepted 2 June 2026

KEYWORDS Co-creation; complex societal problems; public value; public service; problematic drug use

Introduction

Public management literature indicates that co-creation could be a promising approach to address complex societal problems affecting individuals, communities, and societies while crossing sectoral and administrative boundaries (e.g. Acar et al., 2015; Martin et al. 2024). Co-creation is a fundamental principle in public services reform (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021) that enhances citizen participation (Kurkela et al. 2025), service legitimacy and quality while improving efficiency (Loeffler and Bovaird 2018; Sørensen, Bryson, and Crosby 2021), and fosters innovation (Eseonu 2022). Scholars have warned

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2026.2686412>.

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that the ‘co-paradigm’ risks becoming a vague concept, celebrated for its appeal while often neglecting contextual limitations and negative consequences (Dudau, Glennon, and Verschuere 2019). That conceptual ambiguity underlines the importance of examining how co-creation is applied, revealing significant empirical blind spots. Despite growing interest, four major research gaps remain.

First, vulnerable populations receive insufficient attention (Amann and Sleight 2021; Lindqvist and Westrup 2020). Not all citizens are willing or able to participate, creating inequalities (Jalonen et al. 2021; Torfing and Triantafillou 2013). Co-creation often involves privileged citizens with strong collaborative capacities (Røiseland, Sørensen, and Torfing 2024). Although vulnerable groups are heavy users of public services, their voices are underrepresented in co-creation (Gathen, Slettebø, and Skjeggstad 2025; Koivisto, Tiirinki, and Liukko 2022). While public welfare institutions can facilitate vulnerable individuals’ participation (Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023), the result is often co-production rather than genuine co-creation (Åkerblom and Ness 2023; Brandsen et al. 2024).

Second, literature and funding bodies focus on clearly defined, solvable problems (Bammer 2019; Rod et al. 2023), creating a blind spot around how co-creation addresses *wicked* problems (Denford et al. 2024; Rittel and Webber 1973). Wicked problems evolve across interdependent contexts, leading to calls for research on temporal dimensions (Liljeroos-Cork & Huhtala, 2025) and adaptive co-creation outcomes (Bentzen 2022). It is then necessary to view co-creation as evolving in response to conditions and stakeholder interactions (e.g. Mikkelsen and Røiseland 2024). However, wicked problems create tensions leading to value co-destruction (Naveed, Farooqi, and Salman 2025), especially when collective welfare reduces individual benefits.

Third, recent empirical studies on co-creation have focused on specific domains such as daycare and schools (Bentzen 2022; Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023), youth-oriented social and healthcare services (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021), and welfare services related to sick leave insurance (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023). These studies suggest that continuous co-creation throughout the early and later phases of a process enhances innovation, fosters ownership of solutions, and strengthens partnerships (Bentzen 2022).

Fourth, research increasingly examines complex service contexts with multiple actors. Studies show value co-creation in many-to-many settings, highlighting ecosystem processes such as stigma spillovers (Apostolidis, Brown, and Farquhar 2023), interdependencies (Pinho et al. 2014), and adaptive dynamics (Polese, Mele, and Gummesson 2017).

Although research on co-creation has directed attention to issues of unequal participation, wicked problems, and the emergence of multi-actor

service ecosystems, it continues to conceptualize co-creation primarily as an interactional phenomenon. This emphasis hinders the thorough examination of its political and institutional underpinnings. Consequently, the existing literature provides only a partial understanding of how power relations, governance arrangements, and institutional constraints influence who is able to participate, how problems are framed, and the kinds of value that are ultimately produced or undermined. This limitation is not trivial; it obscures, for instance, why vulnerable groups frequently remain confined to marginal or symbolic roles, why co-creation in wicked contexts so often generates persistent tensions and even value co-destruction, and why collaborative efforts tend to stabilize as co-production rather than evolve into more transformative forms of co-creation. Addressing this gap calls for more than a refined analysis of interactional processes; it requires closer attention to the institutional conditions that shape co-creation. In response, this research investigates how co-creation is constituted and evolves in the commissioning of complex public services, where institutional structures, actor interdependencies, and temporal dynamics collectively influence the production, erosion, and reconfiguration of public value.

This research examines co-creation in commissioning public services to reduce drug-related harm in Finland, where drug-induced deaths, especially under age 25, have risen significantly since the 2000s (Official Statistics of Finland, 2023.; EMCDDA 2021). Commissioning is the strategic process of identifying needs, setting objectives, and determining the best ways to meet them, often involving public-private collaboration (e.g. Murray 2009; Sturgess 2018). The issue of problematic drug use provides a contemporary and globally relevant example for investigating continuous co-creation (Bentzen 2022) across various interconnected (Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2025) levels and sectors (Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023) within institutional platforms (Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023) spanning health, welfare, and safety and security.

This study analyzes *how co-creation emerges in the commissioning of complex public services*. Using an instrumental case study, we examine the procurement of outcomes-based drug treatment services in the city of Tampere, Finland. Interviews, documents, statistics, and observations provided our data. The 'ladder of co-creation' framework (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019) was employed because it clearly distinguishes co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction. The framework aligns with the work of Arnstein (1969) in highlighting the potential benefits and drawbacks of collaboration.

This study contributes to the evolving discourse on public value co-creation in two ways. First, drawing on the ladder of co-creation mentioned above (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019) introduces a systemic co-creation model that incorporates

new themes identified through empirical analysis. The model explores the interplay among interconnectedness, temporal perspectives, and the risks surrounding integrating innovation. It thus advances work on co-creation, offering both practical and theoretical insights to aid in addressing complex societal challenges. Second, this study enhances our understanding of the processes through which public value is created (Cui and Aulton 2023; Meynhardt 2021). Public value creation is not a static or singular achievement, but an ongoing, iterative process shaped by continuous interactions among diverse actors. This study elucidates the dynamic and context-dependent nature of public value co-creation, underscoring the necessity for an adaptive system for continuous improvement.

Positioning co-creation as an approach to complex societal problems

Characteristics of complex societal problems

Complex societal problems arise in multi-actor environments featuring divergent worldviews, agendas, educational and professional backgrounds, responsibilities, and cultural traditions (Weber and Khademian 2008). These problems are intricately interconnected (Dawes, Cresswell, and Pardo 2009). The situation fosters emergent properties (Sawyer 2005), transcending individual components and complicated problem definitions, often accompanied by significant cognitive uncertainty (van Bueren, Klijn, and Koppenjan 2003) and political limits to processing them (May, Jochim, and Pump 2013). An example of a complex societal issue is problematic drug use, which impacts the well-being, safety, and security of individuals, families, communities, and society (see Table 1).

A framework for integrating co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction

Theoretical studies have explored co-creation and distinguished co-creation and the narrower concept of co-production (Brandsen, Steen, and Verschuere 2018; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). Additionally, research has identified the dimension of co-destruction, highlighting potential negative outcomes of collaboration (Engen et al. 2021; Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2025; B. N. Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016).

Co-creation centres on generating public value – something significant or essential in society (Moore 1995; Torfing and Ansell 2021). Public value arises from societal dialogue defining what is valuable (Benington 2011). While public value has been extensively explored (e.g. Cui and

Table 1. Problematic drug use as a complex societal problem (e.g. Alho et al. 2020 Jones et al. 2018; Nousiainen and Leemann 2024; Rod et al. 2023; Stewart et al. 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2024).

Problematic drug use as an example of a complex societal problem	
Syndemic mutually reinforcing risks related to the phenomenon	Key issues and risks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – High morbidity (physical and mental health) and mortality. – Social problems such as homelessness, lack of education, unemployment, and drug-related crimes. – Risk of social exclusion, vulnerability, and marginalization.
Multiactor environment	A broad range of stakeholders with differing perspectives and roles, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – individuals who use drugs, their families and relatives, other citizens – third sector organizations – general and specialized health and social services – educational and employment services – police and the criminal justice system (noting the close links between drug trafficking and organized crime) – local and national policymakers
Interconnectivity	The actions of one actor influence the actions and outcomes of others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Criminalizing drug use and the resulting stigma may discourage individuals from seeking treatment. – Digital identification requirements for accessing services and benefits may reduce their accessibility. – Accessible outpatient services can prevent the need for round-the-clock care but require suitable housing solutions. – Social inclusion in local communities, education, and employment is strongly linked to well-being and recovery. – Barriers to accessing services and benefits increase morbidity, mortality, and social problems. – Social exclusion causes insecurity for individuals and society, creating conditions conducive to drug-related crime.

Aulton 2023; Hartley et al. 2017; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007), it remains fraught with challenges (Fukumoto and Bozeman 2018). A major challenge is understanding how public value is created (Meynhardt 2021). The relationship between public services and public value has received limited attention in previous research (Virtanen and Jalonen 2024).

Although co-creation is central to policy programmes and commissioning public services (e.g. Barraket, Keast, and Furneaux 2016; Tirronen 2020; Torfing, Sørensen, and Breimo 2022; Torvinen and Ulkuniemi 2016), critics argue it is often abstract and overly idealized ‘magic concept’ (Bentzen, Siverbo, and Winsvold 2025; Torfing, Sørensen, and Breimo 2022;

Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015), creating unrealistic expectations and complicating its practical application.

This study defines co-creation as a collaborative process (the *what*) involving relevant and affected public and private actors (the *who*) to identify complex societal problems, design and implement optimal solutions (the *how*), and enhance public value (the *why*). The current analysis applies the 'ladder of co-creation' framework to distinguish co-creation from related concepts and avoid conflating concepts assigned a 'co-' prefix (e.g. O. Williams et al. 2020). The framework was developed by Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland (2019) from Arnstein's (1969) work to clarify the relationship between co-creation and co-production. Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen (2021) expanded it to integrate co-destruction, which can occur when delivering public services in complex multi-actor environments (Naveed, Farooqi, and Salman 2025). Unlike Arnstein's ladder, the ladder of co-creation is more appropriate for today's complex world because it encompasses collaboration with relevant actors and the unintended or intended negative effects of co-creation on public value. The framework has three main sections – co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction – incorporating seven levels or rungs (see Table 2).

The highest level of the ladder involves *co-initiation, co-design, and co-implementation*, where interdependent public (e.g. authorities, politicians) and private (e.g. citizens, service users, service providers) actors collaborate horizontally. These collaborations take place on suitable institutional platforms and aim to identify shared societal problems, design innovative solutions to improve the service system, implement them, and create public value. The second highest level is *co-design with robust dialogue*, while the third is *co-design with limited dialogue*. Those levels involve progressively reduced collaborative engagement, lessening the potential for achieving system-level innovations compared to the highest, ideal form of co-creation (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing and Ansell 2021).

The ladder's middle section includes *co-implementation for others* and *oneself*, shifting focus from system design to service production and delivery. Collaboration typically occurs between service users, citizens, and providers to create value for service users. Innovation, if it occurs, is incidental, not intentional (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019; Torfing & Ansel, 2021).

At the bottom of the ladder are two levels where the collaboration fails to create public value and may even diminish it (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; B. N. Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016). These failures can result from a lack of transparency, insufficient administrative competence, resource misintegration, inability to serve, or mistakes (Engen et al. 2021; Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2025). The second-lowest level, symbolic co-creation, refers to situations in which collaboration is

Table 2. The ladder of co-creation (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing and Ansell 2021; B. N. Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016).

Levels or “rungs” of the ladder	
<p>Co-creation Identifying societal problems and designing service systems, with a focus on public value creation.</p>	<p>1. Co-initiation, co-design, and co-implementation Relevant public and private actors collaborate at all stages of the processes to facilitate collaborative innovations, pilot them, and coordinate their implementation.</p>
<p>Co-production Producing services, with a focus on creating value for service users.</p>	<p>2. Co-design with robust dialogue Relevant public and private actors engage in meaningful, mutual dialogue during ad hoc meetings to design and implement improved solutions.</p> <p>3. Co-design with limited dialogue Citizens, service users, or other private actors supply input through feedback, surveys, interviews, and public hearings, though the dialogue remains limited.</p>
<p>Co-destruction Intentional or unintentional negative impact on (public)value.</p>	<p>4. Co-implementation for others Citizens volunteer or act as peers alongside professionals to deliver services for others.</p> <p>5. Co-implementation for oneself Citizens actively use services to meet their own needs, contributing to their well-being through co-production.</p> <p>6. Symbolic co-creation Inadequate co-creation platforms and processes, at worst illusion of participation</p> <p>7. Co-contamination Misuse of resources during collaboration leads to harmful or dangerous services or processes.</p>

retorically emphasized in strategies and programmes but does not materialize in practice (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021). The lowest level, co-contamination, occurs when public or private resources are misused. That situation will negatively impact public value and, in some cases, render services or processes hazardous (B. N. Williams, Kang, and Johnson 2016). It is important to understand that the lower levels are genuine forms of co-creation, just as the higher ones are. Their dynamics, whether intentional or unintended, generate negative outcomes. From this perspective, co-destruction is not regarded as an external collapse of collaboration but rather as a processual variation unfolding within it.

Positioning co-creation as a tool for complex societal problems means focusing on issues that are hard to define, and which stakeholders often view differently. Solutions vary in quality but are rarely ‘right’ or ‘final’ (e.g. van Bueren, Klijn, and Koppenjan 2003). Therefore, co-creation is the continuous process (Bentzen 2022) in which public and private actors collaborate on platforms (Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023) to identify problems and co-design, pilot, and implement innovative solutions to create

public value (Torfing and Ansell 2021). However, the process risks value co-destruction (e.g. Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021).

Context of the study

This instrumental case study (e.g. Baxter and Jack 2008) examines co-creation in commissioning public services within the health, welfare, safety, and security environment. The selected case is an innovative outcomes-based drug treatment service (DTS) procurement in Tampere, Finland (population 250,000), chosen for two reasons. First, due to the syndemic nature (Rod et al. 2023; Willen et al. 2017) of factors associated with problematic drug use and the complexity of drug-related harm reduction (see Table 1). Second, co-creation is essential to outcomes-based commissioning (OBC), which drives change and generates public value (Farr 2016; Tirronen 2020). Measurement and evaluation track outcomes in OBC, address intended change, and assess generated public value (Smith et al. 2017). These measures should align with service users' values (e.g. Harlock 2014; Tirronen 2020; Tirronen et al. 2020).

In Finland, services for people with problematic drug use, including outpatient and institutional care, rehabilitation, housing, and support, are organized through general social and health services, specialized substance abuse services, and special medical care. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH) leads drug policy and the intersectoral Drug Policy Coordination Group, including representatives from the Interior and Justice Ministries. The MSAH drafts sector legislation and guidance.

Municipalities (known as well-being services counties from 2023) organize these services and can provide them, collaborate with other municipalities, or procure them from private providers. Residents and service users have the right to participate in service planning, implementation, and evaluation (Municipalities Act 5:22 §). In Finland, drug use is illegal. However, prosecution or punishment can sometimes be avoided if the person seeks MSAH-approved treatment (Criminal Code 50:7 §). The legislator guides local prosecutors, police, and social and health authorities to collaborate on practices that facilitate access to treatment (Guideline of the Prosecutor General 2018:2).

In Tampere, the OBC of DTS originated in 2015 as part of the Managing Innovative Public Procurement project within the municipality. It was established to foster collaboration between the municipality, service users, the third sector, and the market. Initially, the procurement goal was to co-create a comprehensive, integrated model with services tailored to individuals who use opioids problematically.

During the initial DTS procurement phase, the municipality used service design methods involving 26 service users. This approach created the preliminary 'no one falls' model, refined in three workshops with service users,

providers, and other actors, and through discussions on Innovillage, Finland's open online platform for innovations. During tendering in 2016, collaboration among potential providers was encouraged through negotiated procedures, with offers requested from consortia rather than individual providers.

Partnership agreements spanning 2017–2020, with an extension option, were made with two consortia (five providers) to deliver medical treatment, psychosocial rehabilitation, day/work activities, housing, and syringe exchange. The municipality required providers to use its Pegasos system to record data. The partnership agreements aimed to foster innovation and continuous improvement. [Table 3](#) presents the model's individual and societal goals, along with their indicators (see Jones et al., 2018; Stewart et al. 2018).

The model's implementation was overseen by a steering group of municipal representatives, two service provider consortia, and service users from both consortia. From 2017 to 2021, eight service user representatives served on the steering group. The mayor's office assembled representatives of the municipality, service providers, political decision-makers, the police, and educational institutions in 2018 to form a working group to devise solutions to reduce drug-related harm. In 2022, the City of Tampere re-tendered outcomes-based procurement agreements as existing contracts ended, transferring them to the Pirkanmaa well-being services county in 2023 under Finland's social and healthcare reform. Despite this shift, core institutional dynamics of co-creation, including multi-actor governance and outcome-based logics, remained largely unchanged. This transition shifted the service ecosystem, influencing power relations, coordination, and adaptive co-creation.

Data and methods

The interview data were collected in 2022–2023 using purposive, criterion-based sampling of key informants (Palinkas et al. 2015) who influenced the commissioning and governance of the DTS model. Informants were selected based on their experience of participating in co-creation within the key arenas through which the DTS model was designed, implemented, and governed. The selection criteria included membership of the local DTS steering group during the period 2017–2021, membership of the mayor's working group (2018), or involvement with national-level governance shaping drug policy and service provision.

The informants comprised representatives of the municipality, service users, and service providers who were members of the DTS steering group, and also politicians and police representatives from a working group appointed by the mayor. We also interviewed staff from the MSAH and its

subordinate agency, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), both of which play a central role in national-level governance of the policy domain described above. The interviewees brought professional and experiential perspectives, including medicine, nursing, social work, security, political decision-making, and lived experience as service users (Figure 1). Rather than pursuing statistical representativeness, the sampling strategy aimed to encapsulate the diversity in the institutional positions and perspectives through which co-creation is enacted, negotiated, and contested in the commissioning of complex services.

The study received a research permit from the City of Tampere and ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Helsinki Deaconess Foundation. All participants gave informed consent. Data collection comprised four focus group interviews with local representatives (municipal and political decision-makers, consortia A and B) and individual interviews with four service users and a police representative, with service users from the steering group aiding in interview planning and recruitment. Focus group sessions lasted around 90 minutes, and individual interviews lasted around an hour. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Combining focus group and individual interviews captured both collective sense-making among institutional actors and sensitive, experience-based perspectives of service users.

Secondary data sources (Figure 1) enhanced the understanding of the 2015–2021 process, memos detailed meeting participants, meeting frequency, locations, and topics. Outcome statistics (Table 3) showed intended changes, while notes clarified group interactions and tensions. Interviews constituted the primary dataset, while secondary data were utilized to contextualize, support, and refine the interpretation of the interview data. These

Table 3. Detailed goals and outcome indicators of the multiactor model.

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
(1) Increasing individual wellbeing					
No. of service users (excluding syringe exchange)	439	474	463	546	576
Goal: Increase coverage of DTS					
No. of fallen users	127	142	68	67	124
Goal: 80% of users stay in DTS	29%	30%	15%	12%	21%
No. of progressing to further services	90	113	125	156	182
Goal: At least 50% will move on to further (e.g. work trial, studies, or peer roles, psychiatric outpatient care)					
(2) Reducing harm in society					
No. of drug related crimes	1735	1825	1835	2229	1524
Goal: Reduce the number of drug related crimes	72%	70%	68%	64%	70%
Proportion of unlawful use					
(3) Improving the efficient use of public funds					
Use of 24-hour psychiatric care (patients, days) Goal: Reduce the number of patients and days	42, 795	57, 1412	47, 1263	56, 1762	55, 1646
Use of emergency psychiatric care (patients, visits) Goal: Reduce the number of patients and visits	199, 660	237, 687	216, 603	241, 758	262, 840

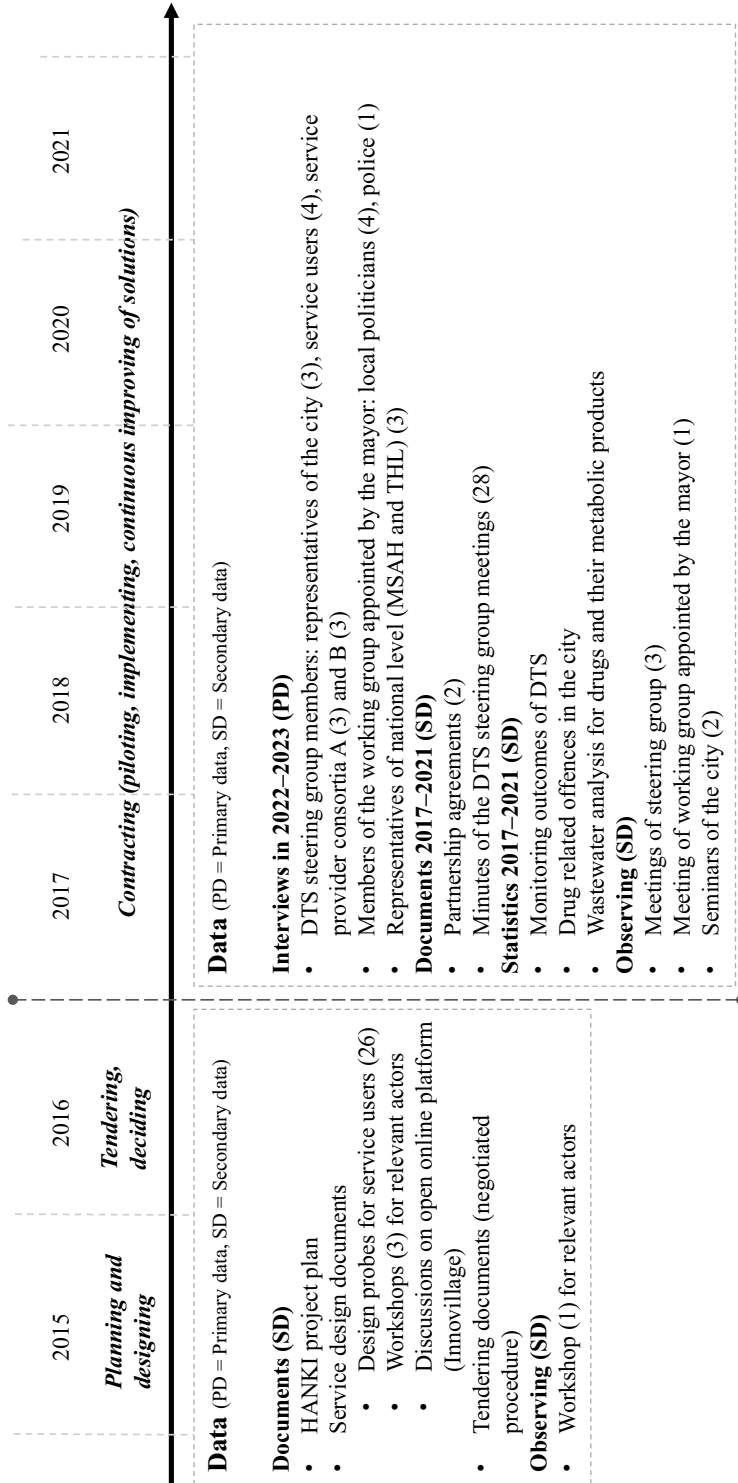


Figure 1. Primary and secondary data of the study.

secondary data were integrated into the analysis through abductive reasoning (van Hulst and Visser 2025), facilitating an iterative movement between data and theory that enhanced the coherence and explanatory depth of the analysis across sources. This multi-source design enhanced analytical depth but required careful interpretation to avoid over-reliance on dominant institutional perspectives.

The first author collected, verified, and organized the data. Before initiating the abductive content analysis (e.g. Graneheim, Lindgren, and Lundman 2017), the transcribed interview data were imported into NVivo software. The analysis commenced with deductive coding, utilizing a coding scheme derived from the theoretical framework (Bengtsson 2016), with the levels corresponding to the seven upper categories of the analysis (see Figure 2). Meaning units identified from the coded data were then compiled into an analysis workbook, and the first and second authors engaged in iterative discussions regarding their interpretations. The evaluation of the extracted text segments yielded 20 data-driven subcategories (examples of excerpts are provided in Appendix 2). Finally, the subcategories were condensed into descriptive themes that encapsulated their underlying 'red thread' (Figure 2).

The results section examines subcategories and themes addressing the research question: *How does co-creation emerge in commissioning complex public services?* Findings progress from co-creation (upper categories 1–3) to co-production (upper categories 4–5) and finally co-destruction (upper categories 6–7). Each of the seven upper categories is introduced with a descriptive theme, and then the subcategories are identified from the data. Themes and subcategories are labelled with letters and numbers from Figure 2. The final section discusses the systemic co-creation model as a synthesis of the findings.

Systematic triangulation of data sources strengthened credibility (interviews, documents, observations), and the researchers cross-checked interpretations across perspectives. Applying a transparent coding protocol and iterative discussions between the first and second authors enhanced reliability. Interpretations were guided by the excerpts presented in Appendix 2.

Results

Adaptive process for continuous improvement

The descriptive theme of the highest level of co-creation (upper category 1) is *an adaptive process of relevant actors for continuous improvement* (A). This process involves several key elements: defining and refining problems and goals (1a), ideating and innovating solutions (1b), implementing and evaluating solutions (1c), facing conflicts and tensions (1d), and transforming

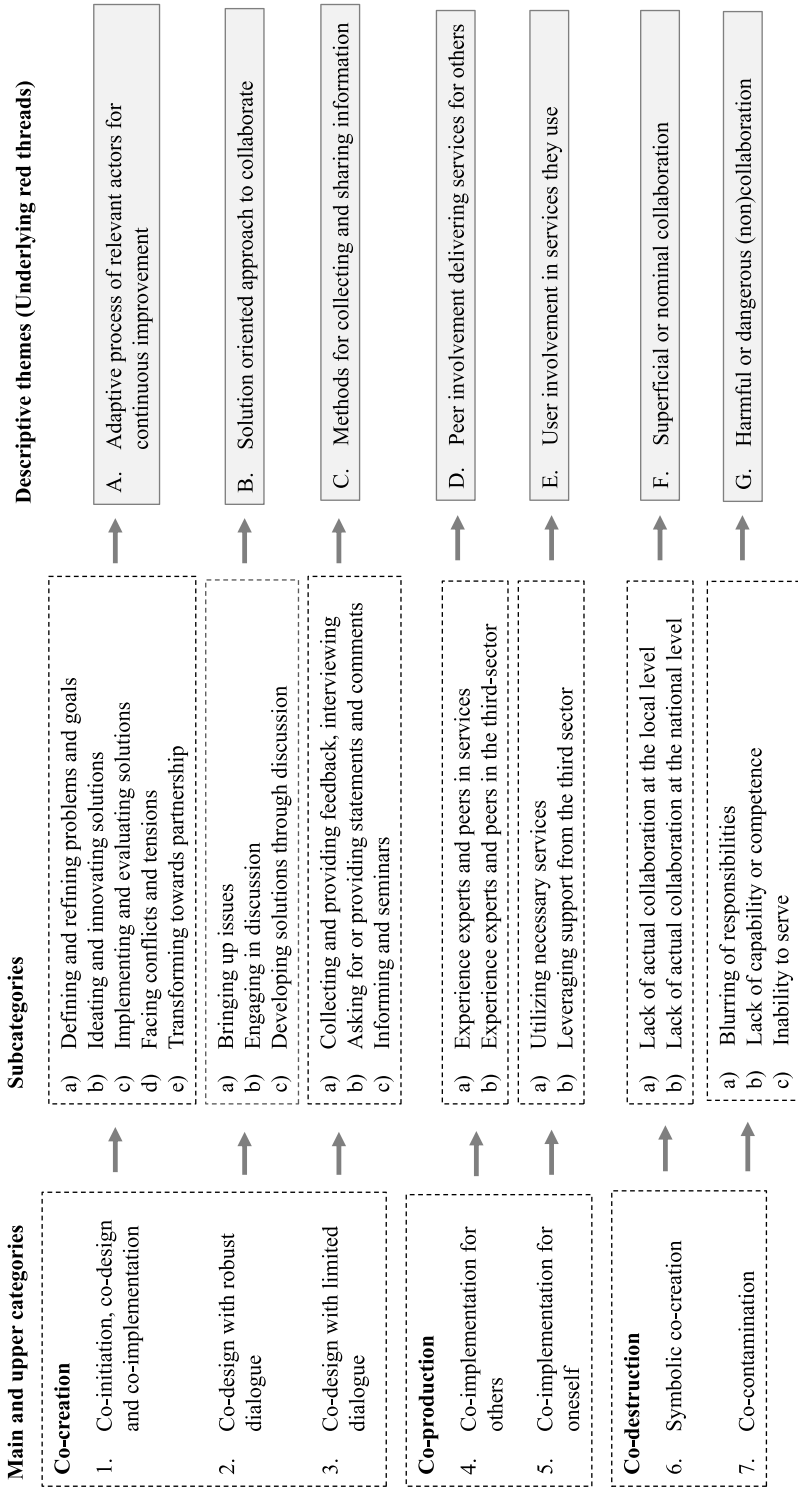


Figure 2. Categories and descriptive themes of content analysis.

towards partnerships (1e). Since 2015, the innovative outcome-based procurement approach has served as the primary platform for this process.

Defining and refining problems and goals (1a) began in 2015, with benchmarking that drew on national and international examples. Following this, the municipality utilized service design, incorporating self-documentation methods for DTS users and workshops for all relevant actors. Additionally, discussions on the open Innovillage platform were used to stimulate and initiate collaboration, helping to define problems and goals from different perspectives. An adaptive and continuously improving approach was essential, given the complexity of commissioning services for people who use drugs. The goal was to iteratively refine problems and objectives throughout rather than only in the initial stages.

The initial collaboration aimed to establish an innovative model and services that ensure inclusivity and support for people experiencing problematic drug use (the ‘no one falls’ model), alongside specific individual, societal, and economic goals with measurable indicators (see [Table 2](#)). Achieving these goals required co-creating system-level innovations rather than just improving DTS. Procedures during tendering, such as negotiation and the invitation of consortia bids, enabled continuous co-creation and encouraged collaboration. However, these procedures required service providers to be willing to collaborate in new ways.

Guided by the goals and driven by the *ideation and innovation of solutions* (1b), the system-level innovation introduced was the outcome-based multi-actor DTS model. The model’s steering group acted as a node linking its members to several other platforms. It included representatives from multiple municipal units, service user representatives, and providers from two consortia. A specialist healthcare representative subsequently joined the group, with additional experts invited as needed. In addition, substantial collaboration occurred with third-sector organizations, which were also involved in various projects within the consortium. In the pursuit of continuous improvement, smaller system-level innovations and collaborative innovations within services were also developed.

During the 2017 contracting phase, the steering group was responsible for *implementing and evaluating solutions* (1c) to drive continuous improvement towards established goals. This model facilitated a new kind of dialogue among the relevant stakeholders, a topic explored in detail below in connection with the second main category. The indicators for these goals (see [Table 2](#)) helped participants assess progress and adjust activities as needed. Some indicators linked to financial incentives rewarded goal achievement and penalized undesirable outcomes. For example, ‘progressing to further services’ required effective ecosystem-level collaboration because access to services like

rehabilitative work activities and work trials depended on municipal social staff decisions and service availability. Notably, the goal termed ‘reducing harm in society’, as measured by the number of drug-related crimes, was not linked to incentives and thus did not arise in steering group discussions.

The innovative multi-actor model *faced conflicts and tensions* (1d) for two key reasons. First, challenges arose due to the steering group members’ diverse roles (such as service commissioners, users, and providers) and their varied backgrounds (e.g. in social work, medicine, and personal experience). Second, adopting an outcome-based model that deviated from traditional practices was challenging. Instead of services being precisely defined by the commissioner, the process was guided by shared goals and outcome indicators. Further, the focus shifted from competition towards collaboration among the relevant actors. Despite conflicts, tensions, external pressures, and changes in both the operational environment and the composition of the steering group between 2017 and 2021, the shared goals and collaborative platforms were crucial to addressing those challenges. They facilitated *transforming towards a partnership* (1e).

Solution-oriented approach for collaboration and information sharing

The theme for the second level of co-creation (upper category 2) is a *solution-oriented approach to collaboration* (B). This approach involves bringing up issues (2a), engaging in discussions (2b), and developing solutions through these discussions (2c). The DTS multi-actor model steering group was the primary platform for this solution-oriented collaboration, both among group members and with other stakeholders.

Despite their diverse backgrounds and unequal power distribution, the steering group members could equally and freely *bring up issues* (2a) they considered important. In addition to discussions within the steering group, members also *engaged in discussions* (2b) on other platforms. Therefore, *developing solutions through discussion* (2c) represented a solution-oriented approach within the DTS steering group and, more broadly, within the ecosystem.

A narrower descriptive theme of co-creation is *the methods used to collect and share information* (C). These methods include gathering and providing feedback through surveys and interviews (3a), soliciting or providing statements and comments (3b), and disseminating information through notifications and seminars (3c). An example of a feedback survey is the annual survey conducted by service providers aimed at service users and other stakeholders. An example of providing statements includes consulting with steering group members at committee meetings and offering statements to the MSAH regarding ongoing law reform. The steering group members also

participated in joint interviews with the local media and reported their activities at local and national seminars.

Involvement in service delivery and production for others or oneself

Higher-level co-production (upper category 4) involves *peer involvement in delivering services to others* (theme D), one of the goals (see Table 3) that manifested in the community of DTS and in syringe exchange services (4a), and third-sector activities (4b).

In contrast, a lower level of co-production (upper category 5) focuses on *user involvement in the services they use* (theme E), which emerged in two main ways. The first was through the *utilization of essential services* (5a), which includes individuals planning their own care in collaboration with professionals and engaging in long-term treatment. The second extends beyond formal services, where individuals often *sought additional support from third-sector organizations* (5b) to aid daily coping.

These two forms of co-production seem to intertwine in an interesting way: individuals responsible for their own well-being can promote the well-being of others, which, in turn, enhances the well-being and inclusion of those acting as peers or experts by experience. Therefore, co-production may create a reinforcing cycle of inclusion linked to individual and community well-being.

Superficial or nominal collaboration

The theme of negatively charged symbolic co-creation (upper category 6) centres on *superficial or nominal collaboration* (F). At the local level, this dynamic manifested as a *lack of collaboration* (6a), initially within the steering group of the DTS multi-actor model. That was particularly evident in the gaps in partnership-building emphasized in the partnership agreement and in insufficient efforts to familiarize participants with the outcome-based approach. Notably, service user representatives were left without adequate orientation and support. Another example was the exclusion of service user representatives from the mayor's task force on reducing harmful outcomes of drug use, despite the city's strategy emphasizing citizen participation. Additionally, the absence of genuine collaboration was visible in how different actors within service operations worked in isolated silos.

The *lack of actual collaboration at the national level* (6b) was evident among ministries (specifically, the MSAH and the Ministry of the Interior), among institutions under the MSAH, and in the absence of networks connecting national institutions to municipalities responsible for commissioning these complex services. A clear example was the insufficient collaboration

between social and health authorities, the prosecutor, and the police, who were legally required by law to jointly create regional referral-to-treatment models for individuals with problematic drug use. In practice, symbolic co-creation at both local and national levels appears to increase the risk of co-contamination.

Harmful or dangerous (non)collaboration

The lowest level of co-creation is *harmful or dangerous (non)collaboration* (G), which may occur unintentionally or intentionally. Locally, the *blurring of responsibilities* (7a) was evident in the implementation of services within the DTS multi-actor model, sometimes jeopardizing both the safety of service users and the fulfilment of their rights. Ambiguities seemed to arise from a *lack of capability or competence* (7b) in applying an outcome-based approach, along with the resulting misconception that the commissioner's responsibility for public services could be shifted to the provider. Another example of this lack of capability or competence was the discriminatory and stigmatizing attitudes of some professionals (7b), which hindered access to services.

The blurring of responsibilities and lack of expertise within the service system led to an *inability to serve* (7c). This outcome was evident both locally and nationally, particularly concerning two critical issues of complex public services. The first was the integration of social work – aligned with the best interests of the clients, as mandated by the Social Welfare Act (1:3 §, 2:6–8 §) – into specialized services for individuals struggling with problematic drug use (7c). The second was the absence of collaboration between social and health authorities, prosecutors, and the police in establishing a referral model for people who use drugs (7c). At the local level, members of the steering group and the mayor's working group, excluding the police, seemed to be unaware that the law (Criminal Code 39/1889, 50) mandates collaboration among local social and health authorities, the prosecutor, and the police to establish a referral system that facilitates access to treatment. At the national level, the relevant ministries had, over the years, discussed this collaborative referral process, but these discussions had not led to practical action (7c).

Discussion

The findings reveal core challenges in public value creation identified in prior research (e.g. Meynhardt 2021), including the exclusion of vulnerable groups, the neglect of wicked problems, and the dynamics of conflict and collaboration. The study answers calls for empirical research on continuous co-creation to address interconnected societal issues across levels and sectors (Bentzen 2022; Gyllenhammar, Eriksson, and Löfgren 2023; Torfing and

Ansell 2021; Von Heimburg, Langås, and Roiseland 2023). We used the ladder of co-creation (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021) as a heuristic to examine collaboration as a dynamic continuum of constructive and destructive processes. Unlike linear models, the ladder analyzes how co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction interact over time in complex commissioning settings. The model suits our research on how co-creation emerges, evolves, and fails in commissioning complex public services. The framework describes and analytically differentiates the levels at which public value is created or eroded.

A systemic model of co-creation

The study's insights lead us to propose a systemic model of co-creation to address complex societal problems (see Figure 3). This model differs from previous classifications (Osborne, Radnor, and Strokosch 2016; Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing et al., 2021) by emphasizing the interdependence of co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction, highlighting how those elements interact in practice. The key aspects of this system include co-created solutions, namely the role of co-production within co-creation (1), risk awareness (2, 3), and, crucially, adaptation for continuous improvement, with all aspects being interconnected (4). The systemic approach (e.g. Stroh 2015) explored how co-creation, employed as a strategy to address complex societal problems, can generate both private and public value. Figure 3 illustrates how these components form feedback loops enabling both improvement and, potentially, value erosion over time.

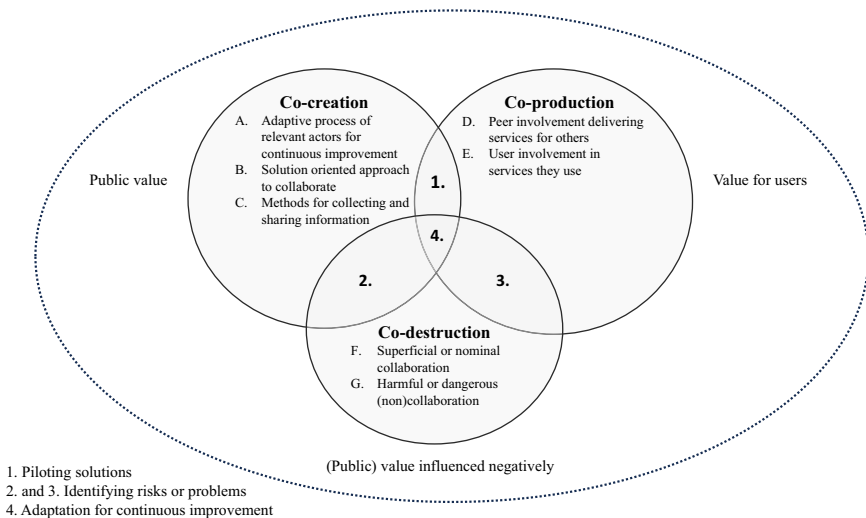


Figure 3. Co-creation as an adaptive system for continuous improvement.

The systemic model builds on the ladder of co-creation's analytical strengths. The ladder distinguishes participation and collaboration levels, while the systemic model presents co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction as mutually reinforcing processes within adaptive feedback loops. This extension enables a shift from descriptive categorization to a processual explanation of how public value is continuously produced, contested, and potentially diminished across governance levels.

Co-creation as an adaptive process and approach

In the systemic model, co-creation in commissioning complex public services is a continuous and adaptive collaborative process in which actors influence and are influenced by an issue. Our findings indicate that this process stimulates innovative solutions to complex societal problems, strengthens partnerships between public and private actors, and creates public value, consistent with previous research (Bentzen 2022). In practice, identifying and (re)defining problems and developing solutions to advance established goals is an ongoing process rather than one confined to the initial stages of co-creation. The outcomes and impacts of co-creation on public value can and should be evaluated, but understanding the interconnectedness of temporal dimensions is essential (Liljeroos-Cork and Luhtala 2025; Rod et al. 2023). Our research confirms that actions that enhance or diminish public value often unfold over long periods and in locations different from those where their consequences manifest. This perspective is also relevant to resource responsiveness in co-creation, which warrants further examination (e.g. Bentzen 2022).

We found that co-creation is based on solution-oriented collaboration and interaction among involved actors (Raisio, Puustinen, and Valtonen 2021; Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019), in which the collection and sharing of information, as well as collective learning and consciousness (Kinder et al. 2021), play an important role. The tensions arising from participants' diverse backgrounds did not signify a failure of collaboration but drove innovative solutions (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) and related to managing the paradoxes inherent in complex societal problems (Waardenburg et al. 2020). Public welfare institutions can offer suitable platforms for co-creation (Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023), and our findings indicate how commissioners can facilitate participation, even among vulnerable people.

The key system-level innovation was the multi-actor model, which served as a central hub within the local welfare ecosystem. The steering group included service commissioners, DTS users, and both public and private providers, and invited experts. Within the interconnected domains of health, welfare, and security, this group served as the institutional platform for

solution-oriented collaboration (see Von Heimburg, Langås, and Røiseland 2023). Despite their diverse backgrounds, the representatives felt equally able to voice concerns and contribute to problem-solving. Establishing common goals and indicators helped actors identify challenges and develop effective solutions.

Co-production as an integral part of co-creation

Co-production is primarily understood through the lens of private value, whether realized directly for the user or for the entities the user considers important (e.g. Osborne 2018; Torfing and Ansell 2021). In contrast, although public value has been extensively explored (e.g. Cui and Aulton 2023; Hartley et al. 2017; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007), it remains a concept fraught with challenges (Fukumoto and Bozeman 2018), including understanding the processes involved in its creation (Meynhardt 2021).

In the systemic model, co-production is part of co-creation and refers to the practical implementation of co-created solutions. Our findings indicate that involvement in service production, whether using services personally or delivering them, both addresses immediate needs and advances broader societal objectives, such as reducing the stigma of drug use and fostering social inclusion. In other words, co-produced services for individuals struggling with substance abuse provide private value to recipients and simultaneously create public value by promoting welfare and safer communities.

The risk of value co-destruction

Like any human endeavour, co-creation and co-production entail risks that positive intentions will not be realized or will produce unintended negative consequences (Jalonen, Puustinen, and Raisio 2020; Margetts, Perri, and Hood 2010). While these processes can generate innovative solutions, they can also create new dilemmas and socially undesirable outcomes (Bovaird 2007, 857). Imbalances in participation often allow the most active individuals and those with higher social status to dominate discussions, leaving marginalized groups, such as people who use drugs and those close to them, largely unheard.

Our findings align with prior work demonstrating that integrating lived experience with formal expertise is challenging, even when the intentions are good (e.g. McMullin and Needham 2018; Van Dijck and Steen 2024). The inherent tension between private and public value means that service professionals cannot rely on individual citizens' opinions to represent broader societal preferences (Steen, Brandsen, and Vershuere 2018). In the context of commissioning complex public services, value co-destruction is a potential outcome of co-creation (Naveed, Farooqi, and Salman 2025). We identified

two unintended consequences: symbolic co-creation, where collaboration remains superficial, and harmful (non)collaboration, jeopardizing service outcomes and stakeholder trust.

Symbolic co-creation, exemplified by excluding service user representatives from key decisions, reveals a gap between the rhetoric of inclusivity and its practice. Leaders typically have formal roles, extensive experience, expertise, and the ability to mobilize resources. That risks relegating marginalized experts by experience to a secondary role (Steen, Brandsen, and Vershuere 2018). Such practices can cause stakeholder disillusionment, undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of the co-creation process. Siloed operations and a lack of genuine collaboration among national and local actors hinder the development of cohesive service models.

Harmful (non)collaboration reveals systemic issues like blurred responsibilities and inadequate competence in innovation. Locally, these challenges manifested as deficiencies in the implementation of procured services. At local and national levels, harmful (non)collaboration was evident in the poor integration of social work and specialized services for people with problematic drug use. Furthermore, suboptimal cooperation between MSAH and the Ministry of the Interior hindered the development of effective regional referral-to-treatment models.

Previous studies acknowledge that co-creation and co-destruction coexist in public service ecosystems (e.g. Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Skålén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024). Our findings additionally demonstrate how commissioning processes institutionalize coexistence. Contractual structures simultaneously enable and constrain collaboration, creating a dynamic in which value creation and erosion evolve cyclically rather than sequentially. Rather than viewing value co-destruction as falling off the ladder, we conceptualize it as a parallel process inherent in each stage of co-creation. Each step can generate or erode value depending on how power, trust, and reciprocity are managed.

Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the literature on co-creation and public service logic in three significant ways. First, our findings suggest that co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction are not adequately understood as separate categories. They would be more productively conceptualized as co-existing and mutually conditioning processes. Empirically, this is reflected in how the same institutional arrangements – such as outcome-based contracts and multi-actor steering groups – can simultaneously enable collaboration, generate tensions, and exclude the perspectives of vulnerable groups.

Second, our findings demonstrate that the formation of public value does not reduce to interaction alone but is constituted within institutionally

structured relations and practices. While prior research has emphasized dialogue and participation, our study shows that contractual mechanisms and the distribution of decision-making authority also shape value creation and erosion. Public value is therefore not only co-created through interaction but is also formed within institutional conditions that delimit and enable whose contributions become consequential.

Third, the systemic model we develop shifts the analytical focus from co-creation to questions of governance. Governance does not appear as neutral coordination, but as a set of practices through which roles, responsibilities, capacities to influence, and the conditions of collaboration are defined. From this perspective, co-creation emerges as a governance challenge, with the central issue being how these conditions are established, negotiated, and maintained. Understanding this dynamic cannot be achieved through the analysis of interaction alone; that requires close attention to institutional arrangements.

Conclusion

Recent studies on co-creation and service ecosystems have demonstrated the dynamic, multi-actor, and non-dyadic nature of value co-creation in complex and contested settings (Apostolidis, Brown, and Farquhar 2023; Pinho et al. 2014; Polese, Mele, and Gummesson 2017). These contributions have moved the field beyond linear and bilateral collaboration models. This study shifts the analytical focus from demonstrating complexity to explaining how such complexity is governed in politically embedded commissioning contexts. Rather than examining service ecosystems primarily as relational constellations, we conceptualize co-creation as an adaptive system in which collaboration, conflict, and temporality operate as mutually constitutive mechanisms shaping public value over time.

First, our study complements the discussion of the temporal dimension of value creation. While the work of Osborne et al. (2022) and Trischler et al. (2023) acknowledges temporality, it does not substantially problematize it. That oversight is surprising, given that in ecology, the ecosystem concept is inseparable from temporality, as time is a constitutive element of system dynamics and adaptation (Costanza and Mageau 1999). Our article shows that value creation should be examined temporally, as it encompasses both immediate outcomes and delayed effects that materialize in different parts of the ecosystem. Value creation develops over time through cycles of adaptation, conflict resolution, and improvement. Neglecting temporality narrows the understanding of value-creation dynamics and risks overlooking the conditions under which public service ecosystems remain adaptive and sustainable.

Second, our analysis specifies when conflict acts as a generative, not disruptive, force in co-creation. We contribute to the debate on conflicts as a developmental resource (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Skálén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024) by showing that conflicts can become tensions that enhance learning or antagonisms that destroy value, depending on the level of participation. The ladder of co-creation shows that user and expert involvement often remains symbolic on the lower rungs, leading to disappointment and eroding trust. When participation reaches levels depicted on the higher rungs, symbolizing genuine co-creation, conflicts can challenge institutional and provider logics, renewing the service ecosystem. The finding indicates conflict management should be integral to outcome-based, multi-actor commissioning models.

Third, our contribution refines the debate on public value in commissioning. Consistent with previous research (e.g. Acar, Steen, and Verschuere 2015; Meynhardt 2021), we show that co-creation processes simultaneously generate and erode public value. We conceptualize value creation as an emergent outcome of interactions between professionals and vulnerable citizens, whose experiences reveal both the potential and the limits of collaboration. This perspective shows that public value evolves through situated encounters where inclusion and trust determine whether value is strengthened or diminished.

Rather than adding another empirical illustration of familiar features of co-creation, this study integrates insights on temporality, conflict, and public value into a coherent process-theoretical explanation of how these elements interact as an adaptive system in politically embedded commissioning contexts. In doing so, the current study shifts the analytical focus of co-creation inquiry from interactional dynamics to the institutional conditions under which collaboration becomes either generative or destructive.

By reframing co-creation not as a linear or stage-based phenomenon but as a dynamic configuration in which co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction operate simultaneously through feedback loops, we extend public value theory beyond static models of value generation. This synthesis shifts the analytical focus from isolated mechanisms to their systemic interplay, clarifying how public value is continuously produced, contested, and eroded in practice. The novelty of this study is therefore not primarily empirical, but theoretical: It clarifies how co-creation operates as a systemic process in which collaboration, conflict, and temporality are mutually constitutive mechanisms shaping public value over time.

This study possesses limitations inherent to its specific institutional and temporal context. The findings are situated within the context of the Finnish welfare state and a substantial governance reform, limiting their generalizability to other service ecosystems. Furthermore, the transition from

municipal to county-level commissioning may have influenced coordination dynamics in ways not fully captured by the data. As an instrumental case study, the analysis emphasizes analytical depth over statistical generalizability, highlighting the need for future comparative investigations across diverse commissioning contexts.

At the same time, these contextual and methodological boundaries also clarify the study's contribution. Building on Bammer's (2019) assertion, this research approaches co-creation as a strategy for addressing complex societal problems.

Our findings indicate that co-creation, co-production, and co-destruction are interconnected, resulting in a systemic model of co-creation. At the core of systemic co-creation lies an adaptive methodology that recognizes complex societal challenges and incorporates ongoing refinement. The systemic model provides novel insights into public value, emphasizing its connection to co-production, which is traditionally associated with private value. Future research might employ the framework of systemic co-creation to investigate the influence of professional groups (Maijala et al. 2024) and citizen agency (Kurkela et al. 2025) on value co-creation. Professionals function as collaborators, empowering agents, service providers, educators, and boundary spanners. They therefore constitute essential enablers of participation for vulnerable citizens and enhance their agency. Individuals in vulnerable positions should be regarded as resource integrators, experiencers, co-producers, and beneficiaries, whose agency varies with respect to activity, voluntariness, and degree of involvement. Future research examining the interplay between professionals and citizens in routine service encounters, and the ways in which those interactions either empower vulnerable citizens or reinforce their vulnerability, should be welcomed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies.

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