

Co-Production in the Urban Setting: Fostering Definitional and Conceptual Clarity Through Comparative Research

Dahae Lee, Patricia Feiertag, and Lena Unger

Faculty of Spatial Planning, Technical University of Dortmund, Germany

Correspondence: Dahae Lee (dahae.lee@tu-dortmund.de)

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Abstract

Co-production is a concept which is increasingly popular in the planning field to refer to multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnership with citizens. However, the existing literature suggests that the rapid growth of the concept has resulted in ambiguity about its meaning. Given that the concept has a potential in planning research and practice, the thematic issue aims to present studies that use comparative approaches as a way to sharpen the understanding of co-production. The issue includes one commentary and six articles with empirical evidence from various countries across the world. The editorial provides overarching context and introduces each contribution of the issue.

Keywords

co-7-framework; co-production; comparative research; urban development

Cities change and face various challenges that are increasingly complex, intractable, persistent, and not amenable to simple solutions (Boyle & Harris, 2009). What is more, when governments prove to be incapable of being the only possible supplier of public goods and services, collaborative forms of public service delivery gain significance (Watson, 2014). This phenomenon is known as co-production; it refers to the collaboration between service professionals and users in the design and delivery of public goods and services (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2015). Underlying co-production is the idea that networks of public, private, and civil society organisations and partnerships with citizens can increase context-specific and effective solutions while maintaining the public values (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Ostrom, 1996). Although co-production has often been associated with the delivery of public goods and services, at its core it remains a concept that refers to all phases of delivery processes from planning to management (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Paskaleva & Cooper, 2017). Thereby, it aims to create win-win situations that are beneficial for all as cities adapt, transition, or transform into more sustainable and desirable futures.

As interest in co-production grows, however, so does the sense of conceptual unclarity. Indeed, our recent study (Lee et al., 2023), which examined the existing definitions of co-production in the planning literature, reveals that the concept has not been well defined. The definitions are inconsistent and ambiguous, requiring more conceptual clarity to avoid contention. Following this argument, this thematic issue seeks to foreground methodologically comparative approaches as a way to sharpen understanding of differences and commonalities that might enhance the concept of co-production. To illustrate, distinguishing or discussing seven dimensions of co-production (i.e., *actor*, *reason*, *input*, *output*, *phase*, *means*, and *context*; see co-7-framework in Lee et al., 2023) can be points of entry for such comparative insights. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we present a summary of each contribution while referring to the seven dimensions.

Co-production involves multiple *actors* as illustrated by Caitana and Moniz where they study under what conditions co-production processes effectively promote active involvement of citizens. Based on the cases of implementing nature-based solutions for urban regeneration, the authors present how *actors* such as public authorities, local associations, citizens, and researchers are engaged in various *phases* as well as the *input* and *output* of their co-production.

The article by Solum, Førde, and Guillen-Royo presents outdoor equipment lending outlets as an *output* of co-production that bridges the divide between government, civil society, and the market. *Actors* such as public officials, civil society *actors*, and volunteers co-produce lending outlets to reduce consumption and achieve societal and environmental goals.

The article written by Munenzon discusses the *reasons* for co-production. By studying three Houston neighbourhoods, the authors evaluate the role of co-production in promoting neighbourhood-scale adaptive capacity and reshaping power dynamics to advance equity and environmental justice.

Co-production is achieved through various *means*, one of which is digital platforms. As illustrated by Kylasam Iyer and Kuriakose, there are various digital platforms, which enable co-production in urban affairs. The authors critically evaluate a number of these in Bengaluru, India. Their analysis provides an insight into what kind of digital platforms enable co-production and to what extent.

Another *means* of co-production is the citizen panel. Yet, there are various challenges and dilemmas of citizen panels in achieving transformative co-production in urban planning. While presenting some of the challenges, Aruga, Refstie, and Rørtveit argue that co-production may not necessarily result in a more inclusive and effective *output* unless power inequalities are challenged.

Co-production takes place in different *contexts*. The article by Alfaro d'Alençon and Moya compares co-production practices in Chilean and German *contexts*, seeking to foster joint learning processes bridging the North/South divide. They link co-production to the “right to the city” concept and focus on the capacity of co-production to challenge power structures and institutional settings.

Lastly, this issue contains a commentary by Sophie Schramm which points out the potential and precarity of co-production. She argues that the concept may normalise and stabilise exploitative state-citizen relationships. Hence, a narrow definition of the concept is necessary in order to distinguish it from the exploitation of citizens' financial resources, time, and labour. She also calls for scholarly engagement with co-production by

examining the existing uneven power relations between government and people. Indeed, this is an important point raised by other contributions of the issue. Authors see potential in co-production, but also provide critical perspectives especially with regard to power imbalance, drawing attention to the gap between the goal of co-production and its impact.

In all contributions, the authors used comparative approaches to better define co-production. First, authors used existing literature (Brandsen & Honingh, 2018; Brudney & England, 1983; Osborne et al., 2016; Ostrom, 1996) to unpack and critically examine similarities and differences of co-production with other terms. *Phase* was often considered a decisive factor to differentiate co-production from co-design (see Alfaro d'Alençon & Moya), co-creation (see Aruga et al.; Caitana & Moniz), and co-management (see Solum et al.). Moreover, the level of public engagement and involvement of government were regarded important factors that make co-production distinctive from other concepts like information, interaction, participation, or self-organisation (see Alfaro d'Alençon & Moya; Kylasam Iyer & Kuriakose; Munenzon). After discussing similarities and differences of the concepts in the literature review, authors presented their empirical study, which involved comparing two to five case studies from Norway, Germany, Portugal, India, Chile, and the US. While the contributions show that there is not a single definition of co-production in the planning field, they demonstrate that comparative approaches can certainly be a way to enhance the understanding of co-production. Hence, we call for more empirical evidence, which allows comparison between co-production and other concepts, so that more clarity can be given to the concept.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Dahae Lee is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Spatial Planning from the Technical University of Dortmund. Her research focuses on multi-stakeholder collaboration in the field of planning. She investigates how to achieve real collaboration of actors in developing and managing urban spaces. In this context, topics such as co-production, network, capabilities, and trust are central to her research.



Patricia Feiertag is a postdoctoral researcher at the Faculty of Spatial Planning from the Technical University of Dortmund. Her research areas include comparative research on land use planning, urban development, city regional governance, and co-production.



Lena Unger works as a research associate and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Spatial Planning from the Technical University of Dortmund. She is conducting research on conceptualizations of digital sovereignty and their impact on urban planning and development. Further research interests and engagements of hers are critical digital urbanism, participation, and co-production.