The Relationship Between

Public Engagement and Coproduction

BY VALERIE LEMMIE

In considering the institutional and civic benefits of public engagement in the budgeting process, we need to acknowledge the relationship between public engagement and coproduction. Elinor Ostrom defines coproduction as "a process through which inputs from individuals who are not 'in' the same organization are transformed into goods and services."[1]

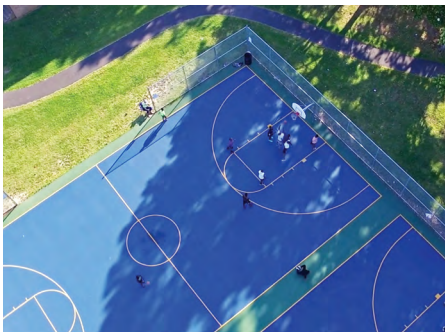
Rather than playing a passive role, with government acting on their behalf, citizens can act as coproducers with government, becoming active contributors "in the conception, design, steering and management of public goods and services."[2] Their contributions provide an economic value to government in increased efficiency and effectiveness, values that should be recognized and captured in the budget. Coproduction also fosters equity and inclusion as all citizens in a neighborhood or community can participate in the work to be done. Local government can help facilitate coproduction and the benefits accrued by creating places for civic learning, neutral spaces where citizens and government can learn to work together in more democratic and complementary ways to produce the goods and services that are important to them.

All communities have civic resources and assets, though they are often unrecognized by public officials. Resources including skills, historic knowledge, time, associational life, and entrepreneurial networks are made visible through coproduction. When community assets and resources are combined with the expertise and resources of local government, a synergy develops that results in collaborative outcomes that promote democratic work and a culture of public engagement, inclusion, and complementary public acting, or coproduction.

Public engagement works best when it is woven into the fabric of civic life, creating a culture of shared problem-solving. It is more than an initiative dusted off at budget time and then mothballed until the following year. It includes a series of democratic practices or behaviors that allow people from diverse backgrounds and experiences, with varying opinions, interests, and perspectives, to put their differences aside and, through deliberation, find common ground upon which to act. In finding common ground, citizens and government develop an informed consensus on how to solve the difficult, often divisive public problems they face.

Coproduction is about building civic capacity and aligning professional routines with the work citizens do to fix public problems. Through public engagement, citizens and local government officials can identify all community assets and resources that can be garnered to address public problems and coproduce the goods and services that enhance and support economic viability and civic life.

Following are two examples of citizens coproducing public goods and services with government.



The Hampton experience

In the City of Hampton, Virginia, a group of community organizers asked the city to fund construction and operation of a new neighborhood center for sports and educational programs, even though there was a city-funded recreation center less than two miles away.[3] While the city and community had different interests, a deliberative public engagement process led to an acceptable solution for all parties—the city and neighborhood residents agreed to work together to find a viable solution.

The city agreed to renovate and maintain a vacant and abandoned junior high school that was originally built for black students and closed in 1968 when public schools were integrated. Neighborhood residents volunteered to operate the facility, including providing program and staff support. This win-win scenario resulted in the adaptive reuse of a vacant and abandoned historic school building in the African American community that many residents had a sentimental attachment to; the opportunity for neighborhood residents to provide the programs and services they wanted; and a partnership between the neighborhood and city hall that met the interests of both.

The Yarborough Henry Thomas Community Center has been in continuous operation for nearly 30 years, offering a mix of public and community programs for neighborhood residents.

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The City of Cincinnati experience

Residents and business owners in a northside neighborhood complained to the city about increasing blight, disinvestment, and the lack of code enforcement that they believed contributed to the problem. The city was concerned about the number of business closures along the commercial corridor and the increase in the number of vacant and abandoned properties. Through a series of deliberative conversations and public meetings, it became clear the problems in the neighborhood didn't lend themselves to quick fixes and easy solutions.

Importantly, it became clear that the city's code enforcement program was broken. Administrative fines provided little incentive for absentee property owners to pay the fines levied and cure the complaint. It was clear to all that the city, neighborhood residents, and businesses needed to work together to find viable solutions. None of them could fix the issues alone.

Ultimately, it was decided that three concurrent strategies were needed, taking full advantage of the expertise, experience, and knowledge of each partner. In summary, the city created, with approval of the state, an environmental court that heard only code enforcement cases and made non-compliance a criminal rather than administrative offense for recalcitrant violators—primarily absentee landlords and commercial investors.

The neighborhood association worked with residential homeowners and conducted courtesy inspections (after a short training course provided by the city) to advise about code violations, and for those homeowners who needed financial assistance, the neighborhood association provided small grants and/or minor home repair services with funding provided under the city's Community Development Block Grant program. Neighbors also testified in court about the impact of unsecured properties, overgrown grass and weeds, and other problems on their health and on safety and property values. The business association, in cooperation with the city, initiated a series of assistance programs to help existing businesses stabilize and expand, and to attract complementary business enterprises and private-sector investment.

While neighborhood revitalization takes time, all stakeholders worked together in democratic and complementary ways to coproduce a safer, more economically viable neighborhood.[4]

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[1] Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, Synergy, and Development," World Development, Vol. 24, No. 6, 1996.

[2] Definition of coproduction, Wikipedia.

[3] Mary Bunting, "Building a Culture of Engagement," *National Civic Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3 (Fall 2018), pp. 54-6.

[4] This initiative occurred when Valerie Lemmie was city manager.