

What can co-creation do for the citizens? Applying co-creation for the promotion of participation in cities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epc**Helena Leino and Eeva Puumala**

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Abstract

Co-creation has become a globally popular concept in different sectors of the society. Its promise lies in breaking down hierarchies between local government, business life, universities, citizens and other stakeholders. Instead of being a top-down or bottom-up process, co-creation involves a multi-directional approach to problem solving. In this article, we scrutinize the capacity of co-creation to transform the practices of public sector in the context of urban development. In this way, we discuss both the potential and limitations of applying co-creation to the enhancement of citizen participation in cities. While new ways of acting can create novel spaces for opportunity, they also bring new winners and losers to the fore. After all, citizens are not all the same: they fall in several categories and some of them have more resources to participate in co-creative processes than others. Thus, it is relevant to know who participate in and whose voices get heard through these processes. We claim that to realise the participatory potential of co-creation, it is crucial to scrutinize actual practices through and networks within which it takes place. Through three co-creative processes from Finland, we illustrate that the promotion of participation through co-creation necessitates acknowledging the heterogeneity of citizens and taking seriously issues of urban social justice and inclusion. In conclusion, we identify issues regarding the sustainability and accessibility of participation that must be unpacked, if co-creative processes are to be used in the context of urban development.

Keywords

Participation, co-creation, urban development, citizens, methodology

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Introduction

The concept of co-creation emanates originally from business and marketing research, where it refers to consumers being able to contribute to the development of a product. Nowadays, it has become a globally popular concept in a variety of cases across different sectors of the society (Brandsen et al., 2018; Galvagno and Dalli, 2014; Osborne et al., 2016; Sanders and Stappers, 2008) and a method for fostering democratic processes in knowledge production (Jull et al., 2017). Overall, concepts such as “interactive”, “spontaneous”, “adaptive”, “co-creation”, “networking” and “self-organising” are highly fashionable nowadays. From one viewpoint, this can be seen as a continuation of a decade long discussion of the forms and goals of collaborative planning (Forester, 1980; Healey, 1997; Innes and Booher, 2003; O'Brien and Matthews, 2016). The current popularity of such concepts relates to the desire to create fairer, more sustainable, and socially more connected societies in the face of increasingly complex challenges with which public organisations struggle (Rossi and Tuurnas, 2019). Inarguably, co-creation has become a part of the public sector's and policymakers' *rhetorical* toolbox (Nederhand and Meerkerk, 2018; Tortzen, 2018) and is currently being adopted into urban settings in the form of experimental living labs, civic hackathons and citizen juries (Mulder, 2012).

Although the participating public has attained a pivotal role in urban planning and development research since the 1970s (Arnstein, 1969), during last fifty years participatory methods have developed and diversified enormously (Lane, 2005; Poplin, 2012; Rowe and Frewer, 2004). In the policy-discourse that encourages co-creative processes, citizens and their participation are given a central role (Nederhand and Meerkerk, 2018; Tortzen, 2018), and citizen-driven innovation is discussed as a way to address social needs in a new way and even as a means to enhance democracy (Bason, 2018; Durose, 2011; Goodlad et al., 2005). Since entering to 2010s, the idea of cities and participatory citizenship has rapidly expanded from physical to digital meetings along with the concept of smart cities and smart citizens (Datta, 2018; Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2019). An emphasis on virtual communities and digital platforms as functional and accessible forms of participation is not without problems despite the fact that discussion about changing citizenship has been enthusiastic in the public sector (Bamberg, 2012; Luque-Ayala and Neves Maia, 2019; Meijer, 2012). Yet, neither the introduction nor utilization of smart technology makes co-creation – or participation in general – more representative or inclusive (cf. Duvernet and Knieling, 2013: 1).

Researchers have made critical remarks on the objectives and usefulness of top-down led co-creation processes, where a clear mission or well-thought agenda is missing (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Lember, 2018; Townsend, 2013; Tuurnas, 2016). There is a risk that co-creation will represent more a trend of participation for participation's sake, rather than an avenue for a radical change within urban development. We argue that while co-creation has gained rhetorical success and entered the public-sector toolbox, it remains an under-developed practice (also Torfing et al., 2019: 805). This article contributes to the debate around the participatory potential of co-creation by exploring what a co-creative process that is fathomed as a form of participatory democracy would entail. *We explore the applicability of co-creation for the promotion of participation in a socially just and inclusive manner in the context of urban development processes, when both urban contexts and citizens' resources are increasingly diverse.* Ultimately, we are interested in whether and under what circumstances the participatory promise of co-creation can be operationalised in the context of urban development.

Castan Broto and Neves Alves (2018) argue for the need to reformulate those assumptions around participation that lay at the core of co-creative processes. Despite bearing

potential for alternative forms of action, co-creation is not free from inequalities, power relationships, and forms of governance that begin to emerge as soon as policy goals are implemented and as they turn into practice (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Laws and Forester, 2015). With participation becoming more polarized (Griggs et al., 2014), a critical reflection on who participate in co-creative processes, whose voices and views get heard through them, is called for. After all, citizens are diverse and some of them have more resources – time, energy, information, and networks – to participate in co-creative processes than others (Häikiö 2010; Michels, 2011). Yet, this does not mean that those who fall outside of these processes had nothing valuable to share. Rather, empirical evidence suggests that, for instance, the involvement of the urban poor in urban planning and activism challenges general assumptions and procedures that dominate planning practices (Castan Broto and Neves Alves, 2018: 373; also Irwin, 2016).

We claim that discussions about the participatory potential of co-creation need to scrutinize critically the aspect of urban social justice (Strokosch and Osborne, 2016; Verscheure et al., 2018). Since participation and inclusion are not synonymous, it is possible that purely formal inclusion results in experiences of marginalization (Quick and Feldman, 2011; Torfing et al., 2019: 803). Combining participation to the question of social justice enables us to examine critically the understandings, expectations and functions of participation in co-creative processes in a way that remains sensitive to the diversity of citizenship (Blühdorn and Butzlaff, 2020; Häikiö, 2010). To this end, the article introduces and discusses three empirical cases from Finland where researchers have played a key role with the aim of tapping into the potential of co-creation. In this way, the scope of the discussion differs from studies that use secondary data where researchers adopt an observational role to scrutinize how co-creation is utilized in the cities (e.g. Tuurnas et al., 2019).

This paper begins by introducing the origins of the concept of co-creation and discussing reasons for its popularity across different sectors of the society. This is necessary to understand whether and how co-creation has changed the debate around (democratic) participation. Second, we discuss the implementation and impact of co-creative processes in light of our empirical examples. And finally, we tease out both possibilities and limitations that are related to both viewing and using co-creation as a way of putting participatory democracy to practice and enhancing urban social justice. As citizen, consumer, and stakeholder engagement has become a taken-for-granted norm and regarded as a solution for economic development, poverty reduction, and a social inclusion strategy (Newman, 2005) in a variety of urban contexts, such a critical look into co-creation seems in order.

The emergence and development of co-creation

In business and marketing, co-creation denotes a form of collaboration, where consumers can influence the production process and final product. It is assumed that through continuous contact and dialogue between consumers and products, co-creation adds extra economic value to businesses by growing demand (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Co-creation, a concept originally coined by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000, 2004), is driven by the desire to transform consumers into users so that the products and services companies design, produce, and sell, would better meet people's wishes and needs. In this imagery that is nowadays becoming a standard for the definition, creation, and development of new products and services (Brandson et al., 2018), consumers are turned into active contributors, co-creators, who extract value for their own good (Payne et al., 2008).

The business development viewpoint has spread to public policy around the globe with co-creation being regarded as a valuable route to public service reform (Durose, 2011;

Osborne et al., 2016; cf. Greenhalgh et al., 2016) The societal turn towards digital citizenship (Datta, 2018) intertwines with business literature, where Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2014: 1) have argued that a paradigmatic change from utilitarian value creation towards a more universal co-creation paradigm is taking place. They have identified seven key characteristics of the co-creation paradigm (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014: xvii): 1) interactions as the locus of value creation, 2) jointly creating and evolving value with stake holding individuals, 3) forming a joint resource base by combining individuals' open and social resources, and their skills with the resources of multiple private, public, and social sector enterprises. Moreover, the co-creation paradigm includes (4) innovating engagement platforms where the above-mentioned actors and networks can connect and (5) leveraging ecosystems of capabilities on meshwork of social, business, civic, and natural communities to engender new capacities. Finally, co-creation is about (6) individuated experiences as the basis of outcomes of value and (7) wealth, welfare, and wellbeing.

It is no surprise that co-creation with its embedded promise of citizen engagement and participation, has been adopted by public sector policymakers (Brandesen et al., 2018; Galuszka, 2019) and now its consequences are becoming visible also in the research and practice of urban development (Duvernet and Kieling, 2013; Nevens et al., 2013). In the public sector, the terms co-creation and co-production are often used interchangeably (Tortzen, 2018: 112). According to Brandesen and Honigh (2018: 10–12) co-creation and co-production both refer to citizen input in public services and to collaboration between citizens and service providers in public agencies. For us, co-creation underscores the role of the citizens at all stages of the process and as potential initiators of co-creative processes. More than co-production, the notion of co-creation emphasizes innovation and creativity and as such it implies potential for fundamental change as regards roles, positions, and relationships between stakeholders.

An increasing number of cities utilize co-creation platforms to tackle challenging issues such as mobility, air quality, and urban regeneration. The reasons for and practices of engaging citizens in public sector processes are diverse (Hilgers and Ihl, 2010; Uden and Nääränoja, 2011). Policymakers often regard co-creation as a solution to the public sector's decreasing legitimacy and diminishing resources (Brandesen et al., 2018). It is viewed as a key method in developing sustainability, markets, services, public spaces, transport, safety, and planning in the city. Fundamentally, co-creative processes emerge and evolve from a need for change. This need relates to the development of public services, service delivery technologies, and digitalisation. As Duvernet and Knieling (2013: 1) argue, co-creation has become "an essential concept for anyone interested in new technologies and collaborative lifestyles". Torfing et al. (2019) have even suggested that the public sector has been transformed from a legal authority and service provider into an arena of co-creation.

Co-creation can be seen as part of a more general drive to reinforce participation as a strategic element and strengthen social cohesion in fragmented and individualized societies. While a shared understanding of the gains of citizen participation in principle seems to exist, local officials struggle to put the potential of co-creation into practice and involve citizens inclusively and broadly in processes of urban development (also Torfing et al., 2019: 805). In fact, applying co-creation to public sector entities arises definite challenges. Institutions in the public sector tend to be large and complex, and they are hierarchically organized and led from the top down. While openness and change lay at the heart of co-creation, public sector actors may well resist adopting an organizational model that relies heavily on the bottom-up engagement of employees, customers, and other stakeholders. Depending on the viewpoint, co-creation bears both the potential and risk of disrupting well-defined policies that

are implemented through standard administrative channels (cf. Castan Broto and Neves Alves, 2018).

The rhetorical success of co-creation is undisputed. However, as a *practice*, its success requires more critical analysis through an empirical exploration of the *implementation* and *impact* of co-creation and the inter-relation between these two. Unlike a referendum, which is a one-off event where citizens decide what is done, co-creation implies a more profound and longitudinal take on participation. Cottam and Leadbeater (2004: 22) argue:

“[C]o-creation [is not] just a question of formal consultation in which professionals give users a chance to voice their views on a limited number of alternatives. It is *a more creative and interactive process which challenges the views of all parties and seeks to combine professional and local expertise in new ways.*” (emphasis added)

If applied rigorously, co-creative processes are profoundly different from digitally organized polls or one evening public hearings that have been traditionally used in furthering citizen engagement in public sector decision-making (see Castan Broto and Neves Alves, 2018: 372). In the public sector, co-creative processes need to take note of and respond to the diversity of laws and regulations, practices of governance, norms, policies, and standards before they can begin. Even the activities in which citizens can or cannot engage are decided by other actors than citizens themselves, which is crucial from the perspective of realizing the participatory potential of co-creation. Next, we will turn to our empirical cases to discuss whether co-creation can give rise to novel practices from bottom-up.

Putting co-creation to practice: Potential and limitations

The advocates of co-creation claim that it “replaces public service monopolies and public–private competition with multi-actor collaboration and in so doing, it transforms the entire perception of the public sector” (Torfing et al., 2019: 798). The assets of collaboration to public sector, both among various actors and across sectors, have been deemed necessary for addressing and tackling complex societal problems, which public sector organisations cannot solve alone (Tuurnas et al., 2019: 6). The potential of co-creation is based on its promise to break down hierarchies between local government, business, universities, citizens, and other stakeholders. It is neither a top-down, nor a bottom-up process, but involves a multi-directional approach to problem solving. The spread and development of digital technologies, smart apps, and platforms has spurred wider conversation about smart urbanism (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2019). However, the social and political impacts of the digital turn and the reallocation of tasks between governments and citizens has remained limited (Lember, 2018: 123; Kornberger et al., 2017). These technologies and platforms seem to lead to selective behavior and replicate traditional information problems on social media (Mergel, 2016). In the rest of this article, instead of proposing digital technology as a simple solution to promote participation, *we want to provide insight into the capacity of co-creation to transform public sector in the context of urban development.*

Despite the several difficult issues that are intertwined around the issue of co-creation, it still involves a whole new thinking about public service delivery and policy development (Torfing et al., 2019). Co-creation could transform entire perception of public service from an authority and service provider to an arena of collaboration and enablement (Torfing et al., 2019: 798–800). We address the gap Torfing et al. (2019: 819) identified and illustrate via empirical studies current practical drivers and barriers of co-creation. In order to explore both the possibilities and limitations of co-creation, we discuss three co-creative

experimentations that have taken place in Tampere, Finland between 2014–2019. In each case, researchers have played central a role as knowledge brokers (Leino et al, 2018), i.e. co-creation of knowledge resulted from a combination of the expertise of participants, city officials, policy-makers, and researchers (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Jull et al., 2017).

The city of Tampere is located in the southern part of Finland It is a city of approximately 238.000 inhabitants, that is undergoing a rapid and extensive process of urban development, which intertwines with a vast amount of people moving into the city. Approximately 7,4 percent of the residents have a migrant background, but the number varies greatly from one residential area to the next: in one neighborhood the figure on non-native speakers is more than 20 percent, while in another neighborhood the percentage is less than five. Initially, the city of Tampere discussed their research needs with us regarding the urban development of particular areas in the city and the possibilities for increasing citizen participation and knowledge co-creation. Yet, the cases most likely would not have materialised without the active role of the researchers (also Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Jull et al., 2017). Following from this, we had the possibility to harness the cases for exploring the possibilities, challenges, and barriers of realizing the inclusive and participatory potential of co-creation.

Our first example is a co-creative experimentation that took place in September 2014 in the Tammela area, located right in the Tampere city centre. The city has extensive plans for complementary construction in the area; building housing for 4000 new inhabitants. However, the plots planned for the urban infill are owned by the 6000 people living in the area. After exhausting routinized formalities of citizen involvement, such as two public hearings, the city planning department realized the need to find alternative ways to interact with the landowners. Consequently, researchers and the city planning department organized together a co-creative experimentation in order to increase understanding of the future of the area.

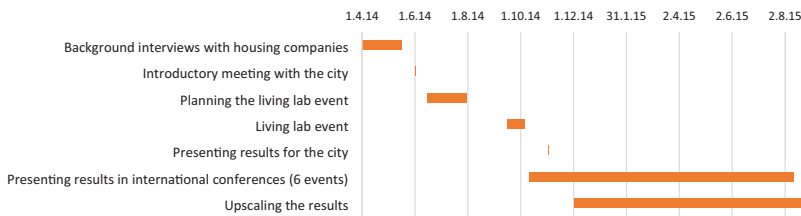
Our second example discusses a co-creative experiment that was carried out with young adults with an immigrant background between March 2017 and March 2018. The focus of the process was to create and disseminate knowledge to promote the development of a more inclusive urban environment. The third example deals with building a public sauna in Hiedanranta, a rough industrial area, which the city of Tampere uses as an experimental platform. The process ranged from May 2017 till June 2019. Two last mentioned cases were carried out as a part of *Dwellers in Agile Cities* project, funded by the Academy of Finland Strategic Research Council (2016–2019). The city of Tampere was a stakeholder in the project and the cases explored in this paper are based on that collaboration.

In all cases the data upon which our analysis is based, consists of participatory observation, field diaries, photographs, and interviews. While the cases do not provide a comprehensive overview of the rich diversity of citizens in Tampere, they do represent diverse groups among the citizens, both in terms of age-range and ethnicity. The diversity of the participants and differences in the aims and execution of the processes allows us to explore the impact of co-creative practices through which we analyze the potential of co-creation in enhancing citizen participation in an inclusive way (see Table 1).

Table 1 illustrates the content, outcomes, similarities, and differences between the co-creative experiments. One of the three cases was open-ended, while the two others relied on more fixed ideas about the final result(s) towards which co-creation aimed. The number of participants was not limited in advance in any of the three cases. The Tammela area experimentation was a significantly shorter process than the two others. The cases are introduced in narrative form before discussing their key insights in light of research literature.

Table 1. Similarities and differences between the co-creative processes.

	Case 1: Urban infill	Case 2: Participation among migrant youth	Case 3: Public sauna
Focus and aim	Producing knowledge from a local viewpoint on urban infill for the city administration	Participating in societal and local discussions around migration and integration	Planning and building a public sauna
Open-ended or predetermined goal	Predetermined	Open-ended (defined by the participants)	Predetermined
Initiator	Researchers with public officials	Researchers and a peer instructor	Researchers with citizens
Activities: predetermined or open-ended	Pre-determined	Open-ended	Open-ended
Participants	450 residents in the area, mostly elderly	35 migrant young adults	50 citizens interested in building a public sauna
Execution	A 10-day event, where a container was opened for the residents to share their ideas through interviews and discussions of the infill plans.	A year-long process during which several workshops, continuous communication in FB and WhatsApp and various activities.	Over two years process including several workshops on site, social media communication and other negotiations with city officials.
Results	<i>Immediate results:</i> report of the citizen viewpoints to the planning officials <i>Developed solutions:</i> novel participatory methods in other parts of the city, new approaches to interact with the Tammela inhabitants.	<i>Immediate results:</i> short film, football team, script, photo exhibition, pop-up restaurant <i>Developed solutions:</i> concept on societal mentors to promote integration, interactive map for city planners and officials.	<i>Immediate results:</i> several sketches for the sauna, wide media coverage, documents for the permission process, database of the skills the participants had. <i>Developed solutions:</i> jointly built sauna. Community (400 members) taking care of the sauna.

Table 2. Co-creating knowledge for city planners.

Co-creation as a way of producing knowledge with residents on urban infill

Currently approximately 6000 people live in Tammela, and the city has planned infill for over 4000 new residents in the area. The infill was to be situated to the existing car parks that are rarely used because of the convenient inner-city location. People living and working in the area, especially housing company boards, showed no interest in infill development when the idea was first published in 2012. The city planning department needed new formats for co-creating knowledge on the views of the people living and working in the area. For this purpose, the planning department collaborated with researchers, who organized a living lab event in Tammela. This ten-day event was arranged in a situation where more traditional forms of participatory planning were out of the question. The possibilities for urban infill in the area had been recognized by the municipality, but the process had not entered the formal planning procedure. The city needed to first create better contacts with the residents who owned the land in the neighbourhood. Prior contacts were weak, and the city had neither the methods nor tools to deepen the relationship with the residents. From the citizens' viewpoint, the suspicion towards the plans that the city had for the area, was based on previous planning processes, where city planners and political decision-makers had not taken into account their opinions and worries (Leino et al., 2018). Thus, the city encountered difficulties in interaction and in co-creating knowledge together with the residents regarding the future of the area. The detailed timeline and content of the process are depicted in Table 2.

In the living lab event, organized in a container placed at a central market square, the researchers maintained discussion and experts from the city of Tampere answered questions regarding, for example, the development of green areas or traffic arrangements in Tammela. Discussion topics ranged from infill in general and more specifically, traffic arrangements, the market square, the football stadium, green areas, parking facilities, and public services to the living lab event itself. Although more than 500 people visited the living lab, most of the participants were elderly people living in the neighbourhood. Thus, the event did not equally represent the whole population of the area. Some of the elderly people admitted that they had been “staring at the blue container in the market place for a week” before they had the courage to visit it and gradually participate in discussions. This finding forms the first critical point when thinking of co-creative processes and the diversity of citizens. People's understanding of their own capacity to participate in societal issues, such as urban infill, can be highly self-critical. Even if one would think that cities belong to everyone, citizens can have rather high threshold of claiming that right (Mitchell, 2003); do *I* have something important to say in this issue? There can be severe psychological barriers that

need to be overcome before participation and the process of co-creation can begin. If the possibility to participate is offered in the form of one public hearing, it neither invites nor allows citizens to co-create knowledge.

From the living lab event instant feedback from both the residents and experts was positive. The process facilitated all participants to grasp the variety of meanings given to the area. Step by step, citizens started to bring their own material to the container or they took the researchers and planners for a walk to nearby places. However, soon after the event, the level of enthusiasm among the involved city departments seemed to drop, especially when the citizens' co-created knowledge collectively suggested revisiting existing policies. This is an important note, *as the co-created knowledge did not produce easily digestible findings for the official planning process. Co-creation did not offer answers that would have fed into the predetermined urban infill goals in any simple way.* To be more specific, the results from the event suggested that more effort and resources were needed from the planners for future interactions: better argumentation skills, more visualizations of the area and other, new topics that the citizens wanted to discuss. The results seemed to be in conflict with the original goal of the city planning officials, and thus the co-created knowledge seemed secondary to them (Rossi and Tuurnas, 2019: 15–18). Moreover, the different city departments involved in the living lab event did not have a joint discussion of the results afterwards. The knowledge created in the event was not analysed from the perspective of possible novel collaboration between the city departments or which department should the responsibility to proceed in a particular issue.

Half a year later, one of the planning officials contacted the organising researchers asking if they could repeat the event, as “you were so good with people”. The city had not acted upon the co-created issues produced through the previous process in any way, and thus the researchers refused to organise another event. The comment from the planner who hoped that the researchers would have taken care of also further interaction with the residents, brings forward our second critical point: participation for the sake of participation is not enough. *The value of co-creation needs to be publicly recognized by all actors who take part in the process.* Even though the planning officials seemed to understand issues raised in the event, the city administration was divided into silos that hindered the development of existing policies and practices. This is the third key point when discussing and implementing co-creation in the public sector: *co-creation is ill-suited for strictly outlined planning processes that have pre-determined objectives.* Our empirical evidence, hence, proves the argument made by Torfing et al. (2019) that co-creation requires a significantly novel way of thinking, if it is to transform the entire perception of public sector from an authority and service provider into a genuine arena of collaboration and enablement. The outcomes of co-created processes need both further work after citizen involvement and understanding of the social forces and structures that can either hinder or facilitate knowledge-use (also Rossi and Tuurnas, 2019: 4; Tuurnas et al., 2019: 1–2). Moreover, if the results are carried through, they may well affect existing institutional norms, routines, and practices – this is even likely. This critical point is rarely raised in the context of public sector co-creation events, which suggests that administrative and institutional structures are given primacy over participants' views and needs.

Young migrant adults: Promoting inclusion through co-creation?

The second case we discuss partners research with knowledge production on diversity and the promotion of inclusive participation in the city. There is a growing awareness in the public sector of the underrepresentation of migrants in decision-making and participatory

processes and the debate on inclusion (or integration) through participation is on the rise in Finland (Heikkilä et al., 2015). This co-creative process was designed to create knowledge of both practices and obstacles for belonging in the city and envision possibilities for the promotion of migrants' social inclusion. The goal emanated from discussions with the city officials.

The process started in March 2017 by finding interested participants from migrant associations, schools, and reception centres for asylum seekers. By the end of the month, around twenty people had signed up and by June, the number had still increased by ten. The participants' backgrounds, life situations, and residence statuses were diverse. Most of the participants were young men, but there were also female participants. Some had lived in Finland for more than 15 years, while others were newly arrived. What they had in common was an experience of not having much contact with the wider society or dialogue with native Finns (Puumala, 2019). In addition, they lacked information about the channels through which to get their views heard (also Irwin, 2016). Significant features that characterized the first phase of the process were the participants' various motives and expectations that affected profoundly in the content and shape of the co-creative process (e.g. Jull et al., 2017).

The process involved finding a balance between what the participants actually wanted to do and commit in, and the aspirations and expectations they had for the process. To solve this, we developed a notion of dialogue as action, which meant for instance that football and cooking, things that were important to the participants and with which they felt comfortable, were put to use in initiating dialogic encounters in the city. This way of working is in line with Greenhalgh et al.'s (2016: 418) view that in co-creation having inflexible goals is less effective in terms of systemic change than an approach that encourages adaptation during the process. When working with diverse participants, co-creation can bring up conflicting views that need to be mediated if participation is not to have a marginalizing effect (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas, 2019; Torfing et al., 2019). In the process with migrant youth avoiding the harmful effects of conflicting views and expectations, the key was to allow participants to define what meaningful participation was for them. The detailed timeline and content of the process are depicted in Table 3.

The second phase was focused on carrying out the activities through which the participants wanted to contribute to discussions around a more inclusive city. The participants could choose to participate in as many or few activities they wanted, which offered insight into diverse views around meaningful participation. The process pushed the conceptions of what participation in the city and in societal discussions can mean and the various forms it

Table 3. Co-creative process with migrant young adults.

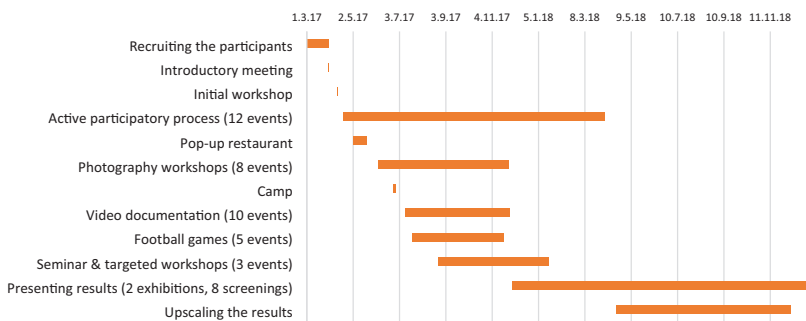
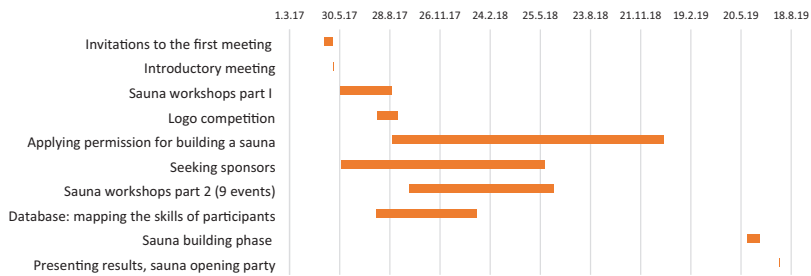


Table 4. The timeline of building a public sauna through co-creation.

can take. Using football, pop-up restaurants, photo exhibitions and film-making as not only ways to negotiate, but also bring to public debate possible hindrances to equal access to participation were experimental, yet effective. The short film and photo exhibition were distributed and made available for the public and officials. The photo exhibition has been set up in three places around Tampere and the short film has been screened in multiple events for the general public, public officials and integration experts. The youth retained copyrights and could claim ownership of the outputs. After the process, participants indicated getting more information about the Finnish system, getting to know Tampere better, and acquiring new skills.

In the third phase, knowledge produced during the process was up-scaled through research. Concrete outputs included a publicly available interactive map on inclusive and exclusionary spaces in the city and a working concept for needs-based societal mentoring for newly arrived migrants that was sent to policymakers and integration experts both locally and nationally.¹ The various activities of the process and their potential in promoting inclusion were also presented to the Finnish government in March 2018.

In terms of implementation, the use of a peer instructor was crucial in mediating power relations between participants and researchers as the hierarchies could not be denied even if they were sought to be kept as low as possible. This aspect can be analytically approached by distinguishing participation from inclusion. Inclusion, here, refers not only to access to participation and equitable participation during the process, but also building the capacity of the migrant youth to tackle and voice issues related to social justice in the city also in the future (also Quick and Feldman, 2011: 274–275). Inclusion, as noted by Quick and Feldman (2011), is an evolving and expansive framework for interaction that “uses the opportunities to take action on specific items in the public domain”. Inclusion denotes not only access to participation, but also connections that emerge and start evolving during participation across issues, sectors, and groups. As regards the implementation and impact of co-creation, participation and inclusion need to be understood as related concepts, if co-creation is to become a multi-directional method through which the public sector seeks to address complex societal problems.

Hence, there are some crucial aspects that need to be addressed, if the potential of co-creation in promoting participation among vulnerable or marginalized groups within the city is to be realised. First, *equitable and inclusive participation is not achieved by saying that all citizens irrespective of their socio-economic status can participate* (also Castan Broto and Neves Alves, 2018). Second, facilitating co-creation in an inclusive and participatory manner is *a time-consuming activity* that neither conforms to pre-set schedules, nor can be based on predetermined activities (also Torfing et al., 2019). Third, the process

should take note of *participants' previous knowledge and resources that can either encourage or discourage participation* (e.g. Häikiö, 2010). Fourth, participation for participation's sake is never enough: *participants expect results* that can either materialise as outputs that address the relevant theme or have direct impact, i.e. change in policy or practices.

Building a public sauna: Co-creation as an innovative practice

The currently fast developing Hiedanranta area was bought by the city from a Finnish paper and pulp industry actor in 2014. At the present, there is no housing but the city plans to build apartments in this old industrial area for 20.000 people in the next 15 years. Yet, there are several on-going activities: small start-ups, artists, skateboarders, university courses, concerts, and happenings of all sorts are taking place under the name "Temporary Hiedanranta".² Since May 2017, one of the efforts to add liveliness in Hiedanranta has been a co-creative process of planning and building a public sauna. The sauna process started in late Spring 2017, as researchers wanted to test the agility of existing planning practices, norms, and regulations. At the same time, researchers wanted to see whether there were citizens, who wanted to volunteer and take part in the creation of common good in a shape of public sauna. In May 2017, dwellers were invited via social media and local newspaper to the first meeting and approximately 50 people arrived. The new network started to meet approximately every two weeks. The discussions concerned acquiring building premises, finding sponsors for materials, identifying the best location for the sauna and mapping the participants' skills. The detailed timeline and content of the process are depicted in Table 4.

While researchers kick-started the project, after the beginning they consciously strived to step aside and follow the self-organising process as participants among others. The city officials who lead the development of the area also adopted a bystander's role. In terms of co-creating, the sauna became what the participants made out of it. The predetermined goal, sauna, did not have any predetermined shape or form. In autumn 2017, after an enthusiastic start, the process stagnated in the city administration as the permission for building a sauna was deemed to require further clarification regarding the water quality in the nearby lake Näsijärvi. In addition, the question on who had liability for the sauna building caused over a year's delay to the process. In the following spring, another location needed to be found for the sauna, this time from the heart of the industrial area, which did not offer the possibility to swim. The sauna was decided to be built in a container. Ultimately, in June 2019 the sauna was opened to the public.

Many elements of the co-creation paradigm (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014) actualized in the sauna process. The interactions can be seen as the locus of value creation for the area, which happened among a rich diversity of stakeholders. The actors harnessed participants' open and social resources together with their skills and utilized the resources of multiple private, public, and social sector enterprises. The city proclaimed the area as a platform for open, experimental innovations and the actors have striven to make connections on the ability of social, business, and civic communities to engender new capacities.

However, the case reveals also critical viewpoints towards co-creative processes. First, the bottom up, self-organisational process with an undetermined and open-ended time-line was highly vulnerable in the existing institutional environment. The initial excitement of the co-creative process vanished during the first year and was replaced by the participants' exhaustion towards a continuous confrontation with the city officials in charge of building permits. Though seemingly minutiae, the situation represents an epitome of the difficulties co-creation can face when implemented in public sector. The city as such is a massive and

complex organization, where different units do not necessarily cooperate with each other. The operating rationality of the units can be so variant that optimizing the objectives of one city department can appear irrational to another department (Leino et al., 2018).

Another critical point concerns the general hype around co-creation: in the sauna process several private companies showed interested in joining the process and the majority of the participants were young professionals and artists, creative class citizens, who used social media in a skillful manner. As a consequence, the sauna gained publicity in national newspapers and travel magazines already before anything concrete was built. This development meets the critique presented towards smart urbanism and co-creation via digital technology: citizen participation and co-creation in social media inarguably increased awareness of and marketed the urban area to be developed. Yet, *the co-creative process neither changed existing institutional environment, nor impacted governmental practices in the city* (also Luque-Ayala and Neves Maia, 2019; Tuurnas et al., 2019). Only after the city officials, who had participated as bystanders, decided to accept the liability for the sauna, could the actual building process begin. *In the context of the current trend of digital technologies, it is important to observe the implications of smart urbanism for public participation.* In the sauna case, smart and competent citizens co-produced useful knowledge on diverse digital platforms at first, but when the process prolonged, these people left the process. *Those citizens who physically attended various meetings were more committed to the process and continued to participate also during difficult times.*

Discussion: What can co-creation do?

Cottam and Leadbeater (2004: 22) envision co-creation as “a more creative and interactive process which challenges the views of all parties and seeks to combine professional and local expertise in new ways”. Yet, our empirical examples raised critical issues in applying co-creation for the promotion of participation in the cities. We identified three major challenges that each of the presented examples underlines as regards the potential of co-creative processes to be used to address questions of urban social justice and to include citizens in urban development. These challenges regard: *participants’ different social worlds and resources; the difficulty to model co-creation due to its context specificity; and the gap between knowledge creation and knowledge use.*

The first issue regarding equitable access to participation and the meaningfulness of co-creative processes, is two-fold. On the one hand, all parties face the challenge of redefining and adopting novel roles in co-creative processes. The sedimented roles and old assumptions of public sector officials representing the legal authority can make it difficult for other participants to engage themselves in novel and innovative processes assumed in co-creation (Torfing et al., 2019). On the other, the heterogeneity, diverse social worlds, and varying resources of the participants require attention when putting co-creation to practice (Jakobsen, 2013; Wise et al., 2012). Accessibility of participation becomes an issue particularly if co-creative processes also aim to reach people living in somehow underprivileged, marginalized, stigmatised or vulnerable positions in society (also Castan Broto and Neves Alves, 2018; Galuszka, 2019). For instance, the co-creative process with young migrant adults required constant effort and in this, the roles of both the researcher and peer instructor as knowledge brokers were crucial. This results not only from the participants’ lack of trust towards the organisers due to differences in social and political positions, but also from them not trusting to have anything relevant to share or their voices being valued. This takes us to the second challenge.

Designing and implementing co-creative processes in a way that would enable its participatory potential being realized is difficult, time-consuming, and context-dependent. Aside from facilitation, co-creation requires effort and time from the participants who need to find the process meaningful, even if there are delays and uncertainty that is beyond their control – as in the Hiedanranta sauna case where the process halted almost for a year without any promise of further progress. Furthermore, if co-creation is to become a tool for the promotion of participatory democracy and inclusive participation, participation cannot be understood as an incentive in itself. Neither is it enough to apply co-creation to legitimize governance and its strategies. As suggested both by the Tammela urban infill case and the process with young migrant adults, the objectives of the process are often born only during the process or the original goals may be subject to change. The latter case also indicates that successful co-creation requires flexibility regarding the forms of action, even within a single process. Furthermore, there is a need for informal channels through which the participants can voice their concerns, hesitations, and frustrations throughout the process. Currently, this approach does not fit in with the existing institutional practices as public sector organizations often focus on short-term efficiency, stable operations, and risk elimination (Torfing et al., 2019). In this kind of institutional environment novel participatory processes imply confusion and ambiguity. In the case city Tampere, most units within the city are not designed to work with unclear end-results and vague understanding on who carries the responsibility of a particular process.

The final challenge regards the imbalance of power between stakeholders, which is a crucial aspect in fathoming co-creation as a vehicle for participatory democracy (cf. Rossi and Tuurnas, 2019: 3). The outlines of urban development are drafted in politics, by members of the city council. Administrative practice, again, merely concerns the way in which these goals and processes are put to practice. If this aspect is not taken seriously, there is a risk of using co-creation to justify policies and development processes that may well ignore the needs of citizens whom it ultimately seeks to hear or include in decision-making. While in democratic decision-making each citizen has an equal say, this is not the case when co-creating public value, as our experimentations of the applicability and impact of co-creation in urban development have illustrated (Torfing et al., 2019: 807). If co-creation is envisioned and marketed as a method to address urban social injustices, the power relations within co-creative processes need to be re-examined and re-organised. In the Finnish context this is a very challenging task, as the power relations within city organization are not often discussed in public and the position of citizen tends to be in the margin of urban development.

Can co-creation become a method of and tool for, if not addressing social injustice in the city, at least working as an avenue for variously positioned citizens to voice themselves and be heard? As we have illustrated through the examples, co-creation in itself does not ensure this. If co-creation is applied with the promotion of participatory democracy in the core of the process, it can shift the power balance among actors or become a way to increase participatory decision-making, further equitable participation and even democracy in the field of urban development. However, as the examples demonstrated, a successful *process* alone does not guarantee that the results will be put to practice. Co-creation, if understood as a way to promote citizen participation in a socially just way within the city, needs to be operationalized in diverse forms that meet citizens' variant expectations and understandings of participation. In addition, willingness to discuss and implement its results within the city is required, even if their form and scope may not always meet the officials' needs and expectations.

We agree with Schneider and Ingram (2006: 338) who regard deliberative policy making as a tool for creating institutional arenas where citizenship can flourish and create inclusion and belonging. The three experimentations from Finland, although diverse, prove the point that people participated to these processes first and foremost because of their need to feel part of the community and belong to their city in one way or another. Thus, co-creation has the possibility to strengthen social cohesion and help to build more resilient communities, if it is used inclusively to empower citizens and to enhance mutual trust (Torfing et al., 2019: 809).

Conclusions

The participatory ladder of today has come far since Arnstein's days (Collins and Ison, 2009). It is not univocal to take the ladder as a setting for diverse steps of participation. Power relations take new shapes and their dynamic changes: both public and private sector companies are more dependent on the needs and values of the citizens than ever before. Societies have changed, and so have resources, actor relationships, and participatory platforms within societies (Luque-Ayala and Marvin, 2019). Citizens are actively encouraged to see the city as something they can collectively develop in a manner that it is efficient, interactive, adaptive, and flexible. New types of social movements, such as Fridays For Future, and participatory urban networks and platforms, such as More city to Helsinki and More city to Tampere social media forums have emerged to complement and challenge conventional forms of democratic participation (Kuokkanen and Palonen, 2018). Citizenship is being envisioned more as an action concept than a formal status. The agenda behind co-creation fits well with these developments (Verschuere et al., 2018). Yet, it remains to be seen whether co-creation changes the governance dynamics and processes of urban development more thoroughly. Can we truly see cities working as platforms for their citizens and enabling action to emerge? How will cities mediate the gap between knowledge creation and knowledge use? How will they seek to ensure that participation is equitable, accessible, and inclusive to variously positioned citizens? Another trajectory for co-creation is that it becomes a service that consulting companies sell and provide for cities, a tool for arranging the required public participation in each project under a fashionable label.

Despite the critical concerns we have raised in this article, co-creation can bear potential in the practical development and planning of more sustainable cities. Yet, this requires that initiators of co-creation strive to include citizens in these processes and that they are willing to overcome sectoral thinking that often characterizes public administration. This, as has been argued, takes time, resources, and effort. The gap between *knowing* and *doing* challenges the impact of co-creation and limits its participatory element from being realized. The problem does not primarily concern failure in knowledge transfer, but rather the gap is a normative one: co-created knowledge can be uncomfortable because it often challenges existing ways of working, structures, and policies. Hence, reluctance towards or inefficiency in putting co-created knowledge into use may prove to be a bigger issue within cities than the challenges of finding participants and facilitation. As our case studies from Tammela and Hiedanranta suggested, these claims may not be welcomed in city administration. As it is, public participation continues to struggle to get out of the sidetrack of actual processes of urban development. Co-creation involves a shift both in mentality and the way of working, if its objective of allowing different kinds of people to have a voice and say, is taken seriously. This means that in order to really embrace co-creation, public sector processes, such as urban planning, need to be 'reset' (Duvernet and Knieling, 2013).

We have claimed that co-creation is a multidirectional process that has a multifaceted relationship to knowledge: it implies knowledge-production, knowledge-transfer, and knowledge-use within a single process. Hence, co-creation must not be adopted only as a participatory administrative practice. Citizen participation should be enabled already from political agenda-setting as a way of opening avenues for participatory democracy. In this line of thought, democracy is more than a system of governance, it is a form of society (Luhtakallio, 2012) that is based on access to participation and a constant, conscious strive towards ensuring equitable participation that makes a difference. For the time being, the degree to which co-creative practices are integrated into the decision-making processes of cities remains ambiguous.

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Notes

1. The map “Experienced Tampere” can be accessed in <<https://citynomadi.com/route/801d322b2f105f31bc345db0fee07767>> and the developed societal mentoring model (in Finnish) can be found in <http://www.agilecities.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Yhteiskuntakummi_2019.pdf>.
2. <http://valiaikainenhiedanranta.fi/in-english>

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