Collective Action And The Sustainability Of Co-Production

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This paper addresses the sustainability of citizen/user participation in the provision of public services, often referred to as co-production. It provides a timely review of the most relevant literature for this important new area for public management, with a clear focus on civil society and citizen participation. Co-producing public services promises to limit cost, but it also requires a change in the relations and behavior of public servants and citizens/users, in order for the latter to make a long-term commitment to co-production. A recent OECD report notes that citizen consultations may be important for improving general public services, while direct citizen engagement in the service delivery phase is crucial for social service quality. However, we need to distinguish between individual and collective engagement in the co-production of public services. Individual engagement by citizens can result in an IKEA-like relationship between the public sector and its clients, while collective relations are based on collective action.

The paper notes that Olsen proposes two logics of collective action, not just one. Focusing on small group interaction can provide an important strategy for achieving sustainable co-production, particularly of enduring welfare services. Here citizens are often locked-into the provision of a service for several years, if not longer. Exit, therefore, remains elusive, if not prohibitive for promoting greater citizen/client influence, due to the transaction costs of changing providers. Voice, in particular collective voice, provides a better alternative for augmenting citizen/client influence. Thus, small group interaction may provide the key to promoting greater citizen engagement and sustainable co-production of public services, particularly of social services.

However, Ostrom criticizes too simplistic approaches to collective action based on size alone for promoting social cooperation in collective action situations. Therefore, she proposes seven structural variables of importance in resolving social dilemmas, particularly for common pool resources. Several of them can also be perceived as factors that facilitate sustainable citizen participation in the co-production of public services. However, some additional factors are also considered important for promoting sustainable co-production, like the nature of the service itself; organizational diversity among third sector providers, particularly in their decision-making structures; recognizing and facilitating small group interactions in self-help groups; promoting a multi-stakeholder dialog between the staff and clients, particularly in situations of information asymmetry; and facilitating small group interactions in large social service organizations.

This paper concludes that governments should develop more flexible, service specific and organization specific approaches for promoting co-production, rather than looking for simple “one size fits all” solutions to the challenges facing greater citizen involvement in public service delivery. This holds particularly for enduring welfare services. Finally, it also suggests several important research issues for the further study of sustainable co-production.

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