

From ladders to mobiles: Towards a situated understanding of co-creation

Abstract

There has been considerable focus in both research and handbooks on identifying steps in co-creation processes, distinguishing between levels of citizen participation, and establishing democratic principles for participation. We build on a processual, emergent perspective on co-creation and argue that in practice, co-creation projects have the character of dynamic, disorderly processes that warrant an organic and situated approach to address these issues. We employ the central metaphor of mobiles – kinetic structures suspended in the air and often moving in unpredictable ways depending on the interaction between the various parts – in contrast with efforts to streamline the co-creation process on principled terms. On the background of qualitative studies in 7 Norwegian and Danish municipalities, we argue that co-creation involves iterative and fluid processes embedded in complex local contexts, in which mistakes are made, conflicts erupt, unforeseen challenges are encountered, conceptions on public values are deliberated, learning takes place, steps are taken back, and adaptive decisions are forced forward throughout the process. Implications of these findings for the field are discussed.

Introduction

The concept of co-creation, originally developed in the business-world, has become a “buzz-word” in the public sector in the Nordic countries where the broad call for a new relationship between the public and voluntary sectors as a comprehensive reform agenda has generated considerable interest (Pestoff, 2009; Durose et al., 2013; Torfing et al., 2019). In the welfare context, this involves a vision of local communities characterized by increased active citizenship, a higher degree of voluntary welfare production, and an inclusive conceptualization of a new municipal “we”, embracing public servants and local inhabitants alike (Fledderus et al., 2014; Sørensen & Torfing, 2015). This has become conceptualized as *Municipality 3.0* (Nordic: *Kommune 3.0*), with a shift from the municipality as primarily a service provider to a facilitator for active citizenship (Guribye, 2018). However, while this framework is linked with *New Public Governance*, ‘*the Deliberative Wave*’ and a shift towards more interactive, participative and less direct forms of governance (Osborne, 2010; OECD, 2020), what it implies in practical terms is still unclear (Horsbøl, 2019; Røiseland, 2021).

Nevertheless, there has been considerable focus in both research and handbooks on identifying steps in the process and distinguishing between levels of participation. Often, there is an expectation that a co-creation process involves a facilitated and democratic practice in which the municipality and citizens work closely together from start to finish to create solutions (e.g., Enhed for samskabelse, 2020). Thus, ideally, high levels of involvement in problem definition, design of solutions, implementation, and evaluation are called for (Bentzen, 2022). The nature of citizens’ participation in co-creation processes has in turn been subject to formalized assessments against normative standards such as Arnstein’s *Ladder of Participation* (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2016; Davis & Andrew, 2017). Furthermore, the link between co-creation, democracy and participation has prompted concern for establishing democratic principles to deal with issues related to power and representativity (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Røiseland, 2021).

We build on a processual, emergent perspective on co-creation (Jensen & Thomassen, 2020) and argue that in practice, co-creation projects have the character of dynamic, disorderly processes that warrant an organic and situated approach to deal with issues related to citizen involvement, power and representation. We employ the central metaphor of *mobiles* – kinetic structures suspended in the air and often moving in unpredictable ways depending on the interaction between the various parts – in contrast with efforts to streamline the co-creation process on principled terms. We argue that co-creation involves iterative and fluid processes embedded in complex local contexts, in which mistakes are made, conflicts erupt, unforeseen challenges are encountered, conceptions on public values are deliberated, learning takes place, steps are taken back, and adaptive decisions are forced forward throughout the process. Consequently, facilitation of co-creation processes warrant competence in coping with this kind of disorderly process, making informed choices along the way based on the demands of the situation and context, rather than adhering to a priori top-down principles. Building on experiences from 7 Norwegian and Danish municipalities, the study contributes to improve our understanding of how theoretical and ideological ideals are dealt with in co-creation processes as they unfold in practice.

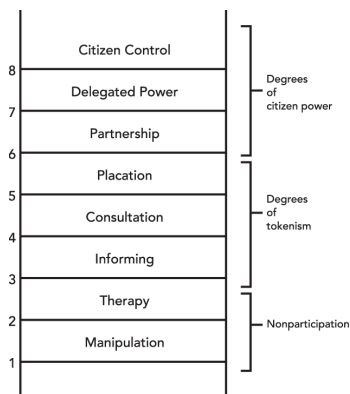
The quest for guiding principles

Citizenship may be viewed as primarily a legal status involving certain rights, but *active* citizenship as political agency and participation in governing is called for at least intermittently (Walzer, 1989). The UN considers promoting participation “*the cornerstone of socially inclusive governance*”¹, and public authorities are increasingly turning to citizen panels and assemblies to deal with complex policy problems (OECD, 2020). Active citizenship in the shape of participation in community development and co-creation is often ideologically regarded as beneficial in its’ own right, and critical studies addressing more problematic sides of participation remain few (Beebejeaun, 2016; Voorberg et al., 2015).

The nature of citizens’ participation in co-creation processes has been subject to formalized assessments, often inspired by variants of *the Ladder of Citizen Participation* developed by Arnstein (1969). In the context of public participation in decision making in the USA in the 1960’s, citizen participation as conceptualized by Arnstein was about redistribution of power to citizens (Carpentier, 2016). The hierarchical model outlines forms of participation ascending in a hierarchy from negative lower types (e.g. manipulation, informing and placation) to positive higher participatory situations (e.g. participation, delegated power, citizen control).

Figure 1. The Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, 1969).

¹ <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/About/Overview/E-Participation-Index>



This basic framework has since been adopted, adapted and applied in a high number of participative settings to evaluate the extent of engagement in co-creation processes² (Mazzei et al., 2020; Davis & Andrews, 2018). For instance, the Council of Europe's *Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process* (2019), the National Co-production Advisory Group in the UK³, and The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2, 2007) have all developed similar frameworks involving hierarchies of lesser and more participative forms. Likewise, Torfing and Sørensen (2017) discuss 5 steps to co-creation as a tool to identify where municipal organizations find themselves on the ladder. At the top step, municipalities are no longer political-administrative organizations offering services to the local community, but an arena for co-creation of solutions in which citizens, firms, and NGOs are excited about the opportunity to influence municipal and local community development.

However, these types of models have been criticised for being too formal and simplistic to adequately represent the often complex and dynamic relationships of power that come into play in participatory situations in practice (Carpentier, 2016). Furthermore, perceived lower levels may not necessarily always be negative for those involved, depending on the context. For instance, some citizens may find it useful to attend a meeting where the municipality informs community members about local issues, without feeling the need to contribute to the decision-making process. The time and energy to participate also differs between citizens (Michels, 2011). Moreover, participation tends to be seen as a stable outcome of a process, overlooking conflicts that may develop between the involved actors, including between citizens (Carpentier, 2016). Thus, the process may be far more dynamic and instable than what is suggested in these ideal frameworks.

The higher levels of participation in these ladders may also raise concerns related to how power should be redistributed within a democratic system (Davis & Andrew, 2018). Co-creation networks and platforms may challenge the parliamentary basis of governing since it is difficult to exercise democratic control and responsibilities among actors that are not necessarily voted into these networks (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Røiseland, 2021). Thus, criteria to evaluate the degree of democracy in these networks have been suggested, including the ability of democratically elected politicians to influence political processes in the networks; inclusion of participants who represent established organizations rather than themselves; responsibility of the

² For an overview, see <https://www.bangthetable.com/blog/international-public-participation-models/>

³ <https://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/assets/COPRODUCTION/Ladder-of-coproduction.pdf>

participants opposite other citizens; and adherence to general democratic principles (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). The ability to organize and control community assets, resources and networks are often in the hands of advantaged community members (Bovaird, 2007), warranting a focus on inclusion and social justice in co-creation processes. In the Nordic countries, laws regulating public planning require citizen involvement in the process, but do not regulate the limits of their involvement (Heimburg & Hofstad, 2019).

However, issues of representation may be complex in their own right. For instance, the assumption that voluntary organizations represent the needs of citizens has been challenged, since some organizations do not include e.g. service users in meaningful ways, and their motivation to collaborate with the public sector in co-creation may be driven by the desire to create a market share in the future (Mazzei et al., 2020).

There is also a world-wide tendency towards replacing the term 'public participation' with 'community engagement' (Ross et al., 2016). While the former term implies a sort of top-down involvement of citizens in public decision-making processes which may be measured by indexes such as the UN E-participation Index, the term 'community engagement' is more descriptive of local small-scale co-creation projects based on a more bottom-up engagement initiated in local communities. This creates a rather different starting point for facilitating co-creation processes where there is a risk that municipalities assume too much control and stifle local engagement in an attempt to maintain a concern for power, representativity and inclusion (Tortzen, 2017; Guribye, 2018).

Towards a matured view on co-creation

While these guiding principles for co-creation may be valuable tools, we call for a shift in focus from *structure* to *process*, and from theoretical idealizations to situated empirical studies that allow us to identify the more practical realities of citizen involvement set in particular contexts. Co-creation, defined as a process through which public, private/civil actors attempt to solve a shared problem through an exchange of different kinds of knowledge, resources, competences and ideas (Torfing et al., 2019), may involve a high degree of unpredictability (Ulrich, 2016). This is particularly true when the municipality downplays its' leadership in favour of a more supportive role. Research has revealed that there is often a lack of willingness on part of municipal leaders to take these kinds of risks, and that the focus quickly revolves around output and results (Tortzen, 2017). In some contexts, the municipal need to control co-creation initiatives ends up buckling the legs of the entire initiative.

However, since municipal laws unequivocally place the responsibility for welfare services in the hands of the municipality – and not its' citizens - control is a legitimate concern on part of the former. While we may ideologically hold the notion of equity between municipal and civil sector stakeholders high, the reality is that there is an inherent imbalance between them from the outset. Municipal employees are paid for the time they spend in co-creation networks and projects, while engaged citizens devote their free time. The former also have quite another legal responsibility than their civil sector counterparts. While volunteer citizens may at any point chose to withdraw from a project (LaCour, 2014), public officials may be required to assume responsibility and see it through. Similarly, citizen participation in co-creation platforms and networks is voluntary and cannot be imposed on them. The suggested alternative to only include participants who represent established organizations rather than themselves would risk excluding engaged citizens and less formalized grassroots movements and organizations, while putting too much power in the hands of more established organizations. In areas with few or none of these types of organizations present, it would also pose a practical problem.

We would argue that these aspects are inadequately addressed in discussions about equity between actors in co-creation projects across sectors, particularly when these are upsized and conceptualized as a comprehensive public reform agenda in the direction of *Municipality 3.0*. The imbalances between the municipality and the civil society firmly guide and limit the leeway of municipalities in making citizens more active and responsible for their welfare. For instance, the fact that citizens pay considerable taxes to ensure their rights to public welfare services is hardly taken into consideration in the *Municipality 3.0* framework. Furthermore, studies have shown that civil society actors often fear that co-creation initiatives may imply loading the burden of statutory tasks on the civil society, taking measures to avoid this kind of scenario (Guribye, 2016; Civil Exchange, 2015; Ekman et al., 2017). Thus, while municipalities may embrace co-creation as a promising approach to create public value, notions of co-creation as an all-encompassing reform need to be scrutinized against the practical realities that face municipal facilitators who try to cross the bridge between ideology and practice.

After a decade of intensified focus on co-creation in Nordic municipalities, the outline of a more matured, nuanced view on co-creation is gradually becoming visible. This trend is perhaps most explicitly expressed in "The Aarhus Compass" (*Aarhus Kompasset*; Mandag Morgen, 2020), a central guide for municipal co-creation strategies in Aarhus municipality in Denmark. Here, a new way of working with its' citizens is outlined without overlooking statutory tasks and responsible management of municipal funds. There is no longer an exclusive focus on citizen involvement (*borgerinddragelse*), but also on municipal involvement (*kommuneinddragelse*), and the need to break down barriers between different parts of the municipal administration to succeed with co-creation initiatives. Furthermore, it is emphasized that co-creation cannot be implemented in all contexts: *sometimes we are merely filling in holes in the road, other times we are talking about statutory tasks we cannot co-create* (Mandag Morgen, 2020:14). The focus is on a quest towards the core of co-creation, addressing reiterative dilemmas rather than hierarchical achievements. Hence, the municipality acknowledges that co-creation may be time-demanding, expensive and resource intensive, that transparency in relation to financial frameworks is warranted in dialogue with citizens, and that taking risks, failing, and learning remain integral parts of the process. Similarly, research has found that co-creation projects often entail extensive "learning by doing", experimentation, and emergence in change processes (Kleinhans et al., 2022; Jensen & Thomassen, 2020).

This kind of organic, flexible and still responsible perspective on co-creation may be at odds with the kinds of strict guiding principles outlined above, whether pertaining to process, power, representativity or participation. We will argue that co-creation is best viewed as dynamic, iterative, organic and relational processes. This may imply movements up and down the ladder of participation according to needs and context, or facilitation of a bottom-up local citizen initiative in which issues of strict democratic representativity may not be as relevant. In other words, overarching guiding principles may not always be applicable or helpful to the process. In line with the realization in Aarhus municipality that, ideology aside, "full" co-creation cannot be implemented in all contexts, there is a need for a better understanding of how co-creation processes unfold in practice, how issues of power, representativity and participation are manifested and dealt with in practical situations, and how a sense of equilibrium between the involved parties may be negotiated and re-negotiated throughout the process.

The present study: methods, settings and analytical approach

The present study⁴ is based on case studies in 7 municipalities in Denmark and Norway, including Arendal, Oslo, Voss, Steinkjer, Levanger, Sønderborg and Aarhus (table 1). While different in size, demography and networks, what these municipalities have in common is an invested interest in co-creation with local NGOs, active citizens and private firms with a focus on creating social meeting points for various purposes. This provides an opportunity for an empirical study on how co-creation principles are met and negotiated in practice, set in a variation of contexts.

Table 1. Overview of municipalities included in the study

Name	Country	Population	Location	Co-creation project
Arendal	Norway	45 500	South	Civil participation in the municipal community plan/ facilitation of co-creation networks within a local Volunteer Central
Levanger	Norway	20 000	Central	Pilot experiment using kindergartens as co-creation arenas
Oslo (Sletteløkka)	Norway	702 500 (2000)	East	Building a community meeting place in an urban area devoid of meeting areas
Voss	Norway	15 800	West	Building an outdoors activity park
Steinkjer	Norway	24 000	Central	Facilitating local community teams
Aarhus	Denmark	355 500	North	Building community meeting points for local citizens
Sønderborg	Denmark	73 800	South	Facilitating local community councils

We draw on 40 qualitative interviews with stakeholders in the public, private and voluntary sectors, the latter including NGOs, Voluntary Centrals (*Frivilligsentraler*), and local driving forces (*ildsjeler*). The interviews were conducted between 2019 and 2021. Furthermore, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in the form of participant observations in meetings, workshops and other relevant events in co-creation projects in each of the municipalities. Fieldnotes from these observations were compiled alongside interview transcriptions to complete the data material. The analytical process consisted of a separate thematic analysis (e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2020) for each of the case studies, after which relevant themes related to the overarching research questions across the municipalities were pooled in a mutual document which constitutes the basis of this chapter. The findings and analytical ideas were discussed, further developed and validated in a series of online learning networks including representatives from the 7 municipalities, and the civil sector, as well as the research team. This abductive process, where empirical findings were continuously deliberated against the theoretical framework used, resulted in the crystallization of the metaphor of *mobiles* to describe the nature of the processes analysed in our empirical material. In this article, cases from 5 of the municipalities will be presented. All quotes have been translated into English from Norwegian and Danish.

Mobiles

Before developing our argument further, we will outline the principal metaphor which we will use to guide our exploration. We employ the image of *mobiles*, a form of kinetic sculptures designed by constructivist artist Alexander Calder (1846-1923) to take advantage of the principle of equilibrium. Mobiles consist of several balanced parts that are suspended in the air and joined together by wire, moving independently or as a whole, and revolutionizing sculpture by introducing an element of the *unpredictable* (Sartre, 1963). Like wind chimes (Nordic: *uro*), the elements do not move in unison from point A to point B. Rather, the various elements of the mobile produce energy to each other, resulting in a dynamic interplay characterized by iterative, non-linear, and unpredictable movements, and sometimes producing both harmonic and dissonant soundwaves. The elements of the mobile, however diverse they may be in shape, weight, volume, number, material and colour, will have to be

⁴ Insert information about research project and grant number here

balanced against each other or continuously find a balance. This balance is crucial for the dynamics of the mobile, or the structure will remain inert and come to a halt. At the same time, temporary offsets of balance (by wind or touch) generate movement.

Figure 2. Mobile sculpture by Alexander Calder, Stedelijk Museum photo archives in Amsterdam. Creative Commons License.



The mobile as a metaphor has been employed to describe how organizations mix the predictable and unpredictable in complex ways (Barry & Rerup, 2006), and is suitable to describe the complex interplay between actors in co-creation processes. As we will show, the process is not a unison movement in one direction. While there may be a vision of an end goal, the process itself is inherently unpredictable and characterized by unforeseen events, conflicts, setbacks, and changes of direction. Thus, facilitation is an iterative learning process warranting skills in managing this kind of dynamics. Similarly, rather than climbing up a ladder of participation in which information and consultation are construed as lower, less desired steps on the way towards the normatively desired citizen control at the top of the ladder, one and the same co-creation process may require back and forth movement between these forms of participation, depending on the needs of the situation.

Furthermore, the described imbalance and equity issues between municipal employees and civil society actors warrant measures throughout the process to establish adequate balance for the mobile to work. Slight offsets of balance in favour of either part generates energy and movement in the networks, sometimes desired, sometimes undesired, and often unpredictable. In the following we will employ this metaphor to describe *movement* and *balance* between the involved actors in co-creation processes.

Movement in co-creation processes

Co-creation initiatives in the seven municipalities often resulted in complex processes that were far from streamlined, involving dynamic interplay between the participants. These processes were characterized by movement back and forth and sideways rather than in a single direction (as in climbing a ladder), reflecting measures taken to adapt to unforeseen events and arising needs; failure to properly anchor the project in the involved organizations; attempts to solve conflicts; or needs for modifications in response to important learning situations and innovative ideas.

Furthermore, simultaneously ongoing co-creation processes within a municipality often drew energy from each other or created new energy in other parts of the local community or the municipality. For instance, participation in municipally facilitated co-creation platforms or networks would often create a culture for collaboration which contributed to the rise of new ad-hoc constellations in which civil society actors would get together without expecting the municipality to facilitate the process. This also contributed to more unpredictability since activity within a thematic or physical area tended

to generate activity in other areas as well. Furthermore, challenges arose along the way and were dealt with in different manners, depending on the context. Sometimes this implied taking a few steps back in the process since progress could not be made in other ways. In the following, we will illustrate these observations with a few empirical cases.

In Aarhus Municipality there are several 'Community Living Houses' (*Bylivshuse*) which are spread all over the municipality, differing radically from one another. The municipality facilitates these Community Living Houses on the condition that broadly based groups of local citizens ask for it. The municipality also takes responsibility for the financial burden and provides skilled staff to facilitate the processes, organize weekly online forums for users, and mediate conflicts. A recurrent issue has been: *"How do we make sure that we are not only including active and resourceful citizens, but also apparently passive and 'invisible' citizens too?"*. Thus, issues of representativity and power were not addressed in terms of democratic guiding principles, but rather, inclusion.

One of the Community Living Houses is called "The Pivot Point" (*Omdrejningspunktet*), constructed as two 40-foot containers which have been equipped with basic facilities for meetings, coffee and tea, and toilets. In 2017 when The Pivot Point was created, an architect invited a group of young local boys and invited them to become engaged in designing the structures. They covered the containers with wooden planks to make them appear as a more elegant structure in the environment and contributed to establish new activities in the building. Activities were initiated by the local community and included a café for young people, a Women's Club, a local library, a maternity group, dining events, a creativity group, and other locally run initiatives. The group of young boys who were seen as one of the primary drivers of "The Pivot Point", started to arrange late night tech parties, playing loud music and attracting other youths from all over Aarhus.

Following our central metaphor, this created new and unforeseen movements in the mobile, including a conflict with other users, negative attention in social media, and the involvement of the police. The municipality had initially succeeded in involving this normally inaccessible population group in the project but were now confronted with the dilemma of risking ostracization of the youths. Hence, the facilitators decided there was a need to take a step back and negotiate common rules. Meanwhile, they temporarily dispensed common access to door keys. However, they also acknowledged the need to be able to deal with these types of dilemmas and used the moratorium to enter into dialogue with the youths and re-engage the architect to hold a series of workshops with them.

This process resulted in a reorientation of focus, and collaboration to set up a recording studio at the house. This accommodating gesture contributed to changing the energy within the youth group, allowing the facilitators to eventually reopen the house with free access for all locals. For safety measures there were facilitators on duty at "critical hours" at the house for several months to avoid similar episodes, until it was decided that trust had been restored. Hence, conflicts such as this resulted in demanding iterative processes involving a back and forth between information-meetings, dialogue and "full" co-creation. If a ladder of participation was climbed, it involved ascents and descents according to the needs of any given situation and context.

Another central theme in our material was related to how citizen participation in co-creation processes would create creative energy in parts of the civil society, making things more unpredictable for the municipality. For instance, in Arendal, the municipality has been inspired by Penta Helix approaches and the understanding that a sustainable and resilient society could not be developed by the municipality alone. In connection with the overall municipal community plan in 2011 the vision statement was that: *"As a public authority, we want active and committed citizens*

who make an effort to help shape their municipality, and who are invited to such participation through great openness from the municipality's political leadership and administration." Hence, the vision was that through co-creation, the municipality wants to contribute to facilitate activity within the local community. This resulted in the establishment of the With a Heart For Arendal (WHFA, *Med hjerte for Arendal*) network as a national pilot project connected to co-creation of a new welfare model (Guribye, 2016; 2018).

By the time this network consisted of around 100 organizations, the municipality, and the local business association, the municipality decided to employ a co-creation approach in the development of the new community plan. Research has shown that participation in public meetings in relation to municipal plans tend to be limited (Klausen et al., 2013). Hence, the key question was how to collaborate in a more engaging and democratic way to mobilize people and resources for a sustainable future and create a sense of belonging for everybody in the municipality. Consequently, they invited members of the civil society into the steering committee of the planning process.

The design of the planning process was subsequently developed in a collaborative way. Civil society actors outside the steering committee were both inspired and impatient to start the process, organizing their own kick-off meeting before the planned municipal kick-off meeting. This created some concern in the municipality, who may have feared that they lost control of the process, even before it had started. As one of our informants put it:

"What surprised many of the municipal representatives was the speed. I mean, perhaps the greatest challenge was to adapt to the pace in the civil society and the local community, and the need to be certain that there is enough time, and that the process is well enough anchored internally [...], that the co-creation process doesn't run faster than what the public sector manages to cope with"

The steering committee decided to invite municipal institutions and civil society actors to host a series of meetings and workshops with local citizens at Volunteer Centrals, schools, sports clubs, adult education centers, the prison, public care institutions, etc. Having been accustomed to seeing the same group of middle-class citizens attending public meetings at the Town Hall every four years to voice their opinions about the municipal plan, the broad participation at the various meetings and workshops this time was a new experience for the municipality. Some groups turned up with their own agendas and ended up controlling some of the meetings, which became a learning point for the municipality: "*When should the municipality maintain the lead, and when should they forfeit it? And if you forfeit it, who do you give the control to?*", one of our informants asked rhetorically.

Moreover, citizens were encouraged to share their views through a "digital public meeting" in a dedicated Facebook group and via email. However, due to the success of the WHFA platform, and the encouragement from civil society steering committee members, participation turned out to be far greater than the municipality had anticipated. The sheer volume of digital input from the citizens created a logistical challenge for the municipality. The prospect of reading and analyzing more than 700 inputs from the citizens was resource demanding. Consequently, they decided to manually select some of the inputs and work them into the municipal plan as citizen quotes. One of the municipal informants suggested that:

"We need to be accountable for looking at all the input, but we can't prioritize all of them. That wouldn't be possible, it would result in anarchy if we should just listen to everybody, and I don't know how we could see it through. But if we manage to get the essence from it, I feel we've done a good job".

Thus, in terms of the metaphor of *mobiles*, the co-creation process was characterized by nonlinear, iterative movement and flows of energy between various co-creation initiatives within the municipality. The various participants with their diverse starting points did not move in unison, but differences in pacing sometimes created unpredictable movement and interplay between them which resembles the interplay between the parts in one of Calder's mobiles. While the process revealed a need for addressing democratic issues such as who to include in the steering committee, how to deal with wealth of input from citizens, and how to involve them in co-creating solutions to issues addressed in their input, it was first and foremost a learning process. One of the members of the steering committee reflected that:

“the most important learning point on my part was that the municipality really wants to be honest and accountable, and if you make mistakes [...] it is not about covering them up, but recognizing them, clearing things up, starting anew [...] because it is almost impossible to work like this, with these kinds of processes and building trust, if there is a tradition for sweeping everything you don't want to show off, under the rug.”

Balance in co-creation processes

While the principle of equity between the municipality and the civil society in co-creation processes remains important, data from the seven municipalities in our study suggests that balance in an absolute sense only makes sense in the context of co-creation as an ideological, comprehensive reform agenda transferring power to active citizens. At the present, and more realistically, equity does not imply minutely adjusting a pair of scales by standard weights. As we have already seen, there is an inherent imbalance between professional municipal employees and voluntary active citizens. Yet, as we have described, a *mobile* requires a level of balance to work. In practice, the task then, is to create *adequate* balance between the participants for the process to work, rather than *absolute* balance. The next case serves as an illustration.

Sletteløkka, a district in the capital of Oslo with a population the size of a small Norwegian town, was developed as a suburban housing experiment after the war, but unlike in other districts, emphasis was on life in the core family and convenient transport to work inside the core of the capital (Vestel, 2012). Consequently, no local meeting points were included in the design of the physical infrastructure. With a population including 80 percent immigrants, considerable welfare challenges, and a high number of transitory rental flats, the area had suffered from this lack of social meeting points.

The municipality started by gathering information from the residents about civil society resources and needs and visions for the area. The residents expressed a need for a social meeting point, and the municipality decided to facilitate the process. Thus, a partnership was established between the municipality and the local community with the aim to build a village house (*grendehus*). Since it was to be the residents' own meeting point, the facilitators aimed to create local ownership by inviting the residents to participate in the planning and construction of it. Some groups, including male adolescents and immigrants, both with strong demographic presence in the area, proved difficult to reach, requiring new strategies while maintaining a principle of voluntary participation. Furthermore, it became clear that there were none civil society organizations in the area besides resident associations, housing co-ops and school parent's councils.

Rather than adhering to democratic principles of representation, the municipality decided to use the existing energy within the local community as a starting point, forming a village house committee including the few local organizations, a group of highly engaged volunteer architects, and a selection

of equally engaged residents alongside the municipality. It was emphasized that the municipality would not simply provide the residents with a building, but that they would rather help facilitate the process to assist the residents in realizing their vision. This implied delegation of power from the municipality to the residents themselves. A series of workshops were organized in collaboration with the architects to co-create the village house in the basement of the only supermarket in the area, allowing residents to plan activities and create fitting solutions for the blueprint of the building and its' interior design. Avoiding a scenario in which the municipality called residents to voluntary work (*dugnad*), power was delegated to the engaged residents in the committee, who compiled lists, went door to door, and invited other residents to participate. More than 80 residents contributed with around 750 hours of voluntary work in the process.

However, at the same time, the municipality provided "invisible work" to deal with required permissions, drawings, consultants, fire regulations, ventilation, insurance, leasing contracts and other matters requiring time and money. Once the village house was built, the municipality delegated power to the residents to provide them with time, space, and guidance to develop the kind of activities they wanted to. Nevertheless, the municipality was also responsible for the administration of the building since the residents were not ready to establish a responsible company on their own. Thus, the agreement was to gradually transfer this responsibility to the residents across a 10-year period.

This case illustrates how the municipality attempted to maintain adequate balance in the project by emphasizing that the village house was the residents' and not the municipality's project. Thus, power was delegated to the residents, who outnumbered the municipality in the village house committee. However, at the same time, the municipality provided considerable "invisible work" which was crucial for the progress of the project but would have been too much to ask from residents who spent their free time as volunteers in the project. Combined, these measures created a sense of balance in the project, with the residents often talking about the municipal facilitators as equal volunteers, but also acknowledging the value of the "invisible work" provided by the municipality.

The particular history of the area with a lack of social meeting points and civil society organizations created an issue of representativity from the outset, in which strict democratic guiding principles would have served little use. Rather, a balance was sought between representatives of the only existing organizations in the area and engaged individual residents who contributed to drive the project forwards. This echoed the process in Aarhus, where emphasis was on including vulnerable groups in the co-creation of the Pivot Points. The young boys involved in the project were not formally organized in any organization, representing only themselves. Still, their inclusion was emphasized even though it implied less predictability.

In relation to democratic processes, then, informants across the seven municipalities tended to be more concerned with developing local democratic competence and creating a culture of participation than maintaining formal democratic organizational principles. For instance, one of the informants in Aarhus said that:

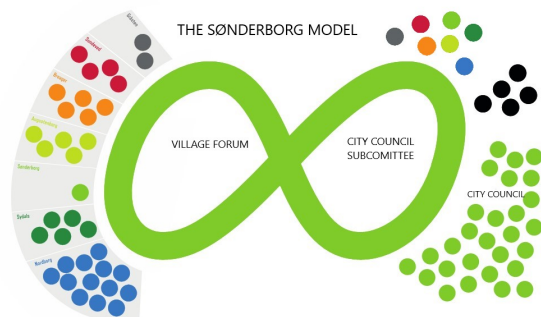
"Democracy is something very different in different contexts – it depends on a high variety of factors. In co-creation a redistribution of influence takes place – and influence is a power which is negotiable and continuously re-negotiated. A crucial precondition is the fact that power is not something that we can own – rather it is something fluid, something regulatory, context creating, context dependent and relational. We have a tendency to talk about how democracy is most correctly

performed. But we have to change that way of talking about democracy. Democracy cannot be put on a fixed formula or be a template to be filled out.”

In Sønderborg municipality further south in Denmark we find one of the most formal and democratically organized co-creation platforms in the Nordic countries (figure 3, below). The “Sønderborg model” consists of a series of village councils (*landsbylaug*) which are autonomous democratic organizations with their own statutory framework, representing citizens within their geographic areas. The municipality covers a small sum for meeting activities, lends the councils a webpage, and offer practical support through a dedicated secretariat. Each village council develops their own local development plans as a pivot point for their collaboration with the municipal administration and political leadership.

Council leaders meet quarterly in a village forum (*landsbyforum*), which is facilitated by the municipality, and serves as a platform for sharing ideas, experiences, information, and implementing mutual activities across the seven former municipalities that have been merged into Sønderborg municipality. Challenges and needs may be brought into the city council subcommittee for rural districts, nature and food (*Udvalget for Landdistrikter, Natur og Fødevarer*), consisting of seven voluntary representatives of the village councils, five city council members, and two municipal administrative leaders. This implies a balance in number between voluntary and municipal members in the subcommittee. Thus, the power of the village councils is balanced against the Danish parliamentary democratic system.

Figure 3. The Sønderborg model, on the left, number of village councils in each of seven former municipalities which have been merged. From Sønderborg municipality. The five black dots on the right indicate city council members in the subcommittee for rural districts, nature and food; coloured dots indicate village council representatives from each of the seven former municipalities in the subcommittee.



While this could be interpreted as tokenism in Arnstein’s ladder of participation (figure 1), full delegation of power to the village councils would arguably constitute a challenge for the Danish parliamentary democracy. According to village forum members, not all community members attend village council meetings – substance abusers, adolescents and other groups are underrepresented although efforts have been made to reach e.g., the youth through social media. Thus, despite the democratic process, there are still issues of power and representation within the village councils. Decisions are also limited in scope (e.g., marking local trails, renovating bus sheds, acquiring a village bus for rent), and topics such as reducing poverty, creating jobs, and addressing social challenges are considered “too comprehensive”, since village councils rely on voluntary efforts. Issues outside the mandate of the subcommittee also need to be brought into other subcommittees for political

treatment in concordance with the parliamentary system. Thus, due to the limited scope of issues addressed through the model, it poses little threat to the parliamentary democratic system.

The case illustrates how a comprehensive, formalized organizational framework based on democratic principles for participation in co-creation networks warrants limitations for how much power is delegated to the citizens. This is not a limitation of the model, rather a strength, ensuring that we do not replace the parliamentary democratic system with a system putting too much responsibility on voluntary local citizens. The responsible balance of power between the municipality and active citizens contributes to generate a sense of equilibrium, which is not absolute, but enough to generate energy and movement in both parts. Village forum members emphasized that participation has made them “*more active, more social*”, and that “*we take more care of each other, and there is a stronger feeling of unity*”. Municipal subcommittee members said the model has taught (and instructed) politicians to listen to citizens and easily get into touch with them, making decentralized decisions possible, with the opportunity to mobilize other relevant subcommittees in relation to more comprehensive topics.

Importantly, our study also identified situations in which adequate balance could not be established and the co-creation process came to resemble the image of a lone *pendulum* swinging by itself, rather than the dynamic flow of energy between the elements in a *mobile*. In Voss, a plan for area development of an area adjacent to a lake bordering the municipal center was developed in 2012. In parallel, representatives of sports organizations and businesses worked together with independent active citizens and professionals (e.g., a physiotherapist, a chiropractor and a sports teacher) to establish an Activity Park in the area. A first stage materialized in 2016 with the establishment of a pump track, and shortly afterwards, a so-called training park with various equipment for outdoor training. According to the civil sector project leader, this appeared to be “*an immediate success, with a lot of youngsters rolling on the pump track, and also a success in terms of attracting funders from the business sector*”. This achieved some limited funding from the municipality and the county but was mainly financed by contributions from a total of 35 local businesses. The project is led by a board of five members, most with a business background, and a project group consisting of several representatives for various sports organizations, as well as independent enthusiasts. The municipality mostly seems to have taken on a facilitating role, and despite the work of enthusiasts within the municipal organization, rarely directly contributing to bringing the development of the park forward. A possible reason for this may be the seemingly weak anchoring of this project in the municipal administration.

Developing the Activity Park further, with two additional stages being planned, has proved difficult because sufficient funding has not yet been achieved. Moreover, maintenance has proved to be a continuous challenge, not the least due to frequent flooding of the area. “*The municipality once promised to construct a protective wall towards the water, but this was eventually not approved by the politicians*”, one of our informants stated. “*Now we have to think afresh and come up with a viable solution*”. The development of the Activity Park seems a typical example of the many pioneering activities established during the latter decades in Voss, where the municipality plays an enabling but somewhat distant and limited role, and where synergies between several voluntary organizations and individual volunteers, together with contributions from private companies, function as the motor for realizing the projects. Thus, while in one perspective, the case seems to be an example of the manifestation of the kind of active citizenship envisioned in *Municipality 3.0*, it also demonstrates the need for the municipality as a responsible service provider to assume ultimate responsibility for these kinds of co-creation projects. Otherwise, the risk is that it becomes a pendulum rather than a mobile, swinging on its own and gradually losing momentum.

Discussion

There is a need to venture beyond idealized and ideological constructions of co-creation as a comprehensive reform agenda and situate co-creation in local empirical contexts. Building on a processual perspective of co-creation (Jensen & Thomassen, 2020) and the tendency towards a more nuanced, matured view on co-creation (Mandag Morgen, 2020), we have argued that *mobiles*, sculptures consisting of several balanced parts which provide energy to each other and move in often unpredictable ways (Sartre, 1963; Barry & Rerup, 2006), may be a suitable metaphor for describing movement (i.e., project progress, interplay between actors and levels of participation) and balance (i.e., dealing with issues of power and representativity) in co-creation processes. Based on case studies in seven Nordic municipalities, we describe co-creation as as complex, dynamic, iterative, relational, limited and often unpredictable and unstable processes (Carpentier, 2016).

In practice, participation is not progress from one idealized stage to another within a fixed hierarchical system (e.g. as in Arnstein's highly ideological *Ladder of citizen participation* (Arnstein, 1969; Council of Europe, 2019; Mazzei et al., 2020; Davis & Andrews, 2018). Nor do these projects follow projects plans with predictable progression from one phase to the other. Rather, the process is fundamentally iterative, and adaptation to context and situation may require movement back and forth between various forms of participation (e.g. information, dialogue and co-creation), or implication of inventive measures according to needs and challenges. Furthermore, the idealized top plateau of citizen control in Arnstein's ladder is challenged by democratic issues related to power and representation, echoed in the observation by one of our informants that there is a need for reflection about *who* power is redistributed to when the municipality steps down.

Since co-creation emphasizes collaboration, equal relationships between empowered citizens and public service providers often replaces citizen control at the top of the ladder, with the participants working together from design to delivery and engaging in deliberate communication throughout the process (Bentzen, 2022; Nabachi, 2012). However, while the value of equity may be held high and strived towards, absolute balance would be difficult to achieve. Our study suggests that limitations in relation to parliamentary democracy, municipal statutory obligations, and the inherent imbalance between paid municipal staff who may be accountable to statutory laws and voluntary active citizens who may withdraw from the project at any point, must be acknowledged (LaCour, 2014; Mandag Morgen, 2020). The interplay between a strong State and a strong civil society remains at the heart of the Nordic Welfare State model (Wollebæk & Selle, 2012), and the accountability and additional resources of the municipality is often a major asset in co-creation processes, not merely a limitation.

Overarching guiding principles pertaining to issues of power, representativity and concerns for democracy make sense when conceptualizing co-creation as a prescription for a comprehensive reform agenda (Røiseland & Vabo, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Røiseland, 2021). However, in practice, local co-creation processes take place on an entirely other scale, far from involving a major transformation of the Nordic welfare states, and with few municipalities prepared to "*jump on the bandwagon in which co-creation is launched as a miracle cure*" (Rønning & Andfossen, 2021:4, our translation). The co-creation projects in the seven municipalities in our study tended to be limited to small (but locally important) projects involving limited parts of the public sector collaborating closely with engaged citizens and local voluntary organizations, while most of the "normal" operation in the municipalities continues as before. Projects included improving the physical infrastructure in an area; generating a meeting place; building a village house; addressing traffic concerns; or using the kindergarden as an arena for dialogue. Given this limited scale, the danger of these local ad-hoc networks of engaged citizens, public servants and representatives of involved voluntary organizations

replacing or challenging the overarching parliamentary basis of governing seems small. However, the danger of stifling the entire project by employing strict guiding principles seemed high.

Furthermore, collaboration as a continuum from design to delivery may not always be desirable by all citizens. For instance, many attended information meetings at Sletteløkka about building a village house but dropped in and out of the remaining process in accordance with their prerogative as volunteers. The kind of active citizenship called for in the co-creation literature can hardly be facilitated by pressing grassroots volunteering into a professional project model with all its implications. Karr and Mejis (2006) distinguish between two styles of volunteer management. The modern, program style tends to be formal, recruiting and hiring members based on formal procedures, training and registration of activities, etc. The “home-grown” style of management is less formal, and less results orientated. People volunteer for tasks that give them meaning and energy. Thus, there is a clear distinction between co-creation projects between the municipality and established, democratically organized, formal organizations, and those with less organized, but active citizens. Dealing with the latter form of grassroots engagement, excessive administration, strict project plans and formal guiding principles for participation may stifle the engagement (Pospíšilová, 2011).

The study suggests the need to develop a new, matured perspective on co-creation, addressing the kind of issues and challenges facing facilitators in practice. These are issues that cannot be fully dealt with by designing a priori guiding principles or adhering to strict project plans. Rather, facilitators need context- dependent democratic, relational and leadership competencies which allow them to cope with conflicts, unexpected events, risks, issues related to power, representation and imbalance, alongside the need for creative readaptation and innovation along the way. Thus, the emergent nature of co-creation projects in practice makes reflection and improvisation along the way perhaps even more necessary than the ability to plan ahead (Jensen & Thomassen, 2020).

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