LEARNING BRIEF 3

Co-production in Practice

May 2021

SUMMARY

- The use of co-production varies widely across different organisations. The design and adoption of co-production is specific to each organisation's goals and capacity.

- Co-production creates an opportunity to improve the effectiveness and impact of services, where services are shaped by the knowledge and experience of clients.

- Introducing co-production requires a commitment by practitioner organisation to opening up decision-making and promoting an inclusive culture.

- Working with service users and communities to co-produce knowledge can generate new insights into long-standing challenges and build the confidence of individuals to take part in collective action.

- As demonstrated by community-led responses to Covid-19, co-production can be an effective way to respond to crisis situations.

1. INTRODUCTION

This learning brief summarises learning from our CoP webinars on co-production held on 15 October 2020 and 21 January 2021. The brief offers practical tips to increase the involvement of service users and communities in designing and directing activity to reduce homelessness and insecure shelter.

The learning brief is aimed at members of the CoP and other partner organisations working to address homelessness and insecure shelter. This brief and other materials are available via the CoP website.

2. DEFINING THE TERM

Co-production is an umbrella term that is used to describe how organisations involve and empower the people their services are targeted at. It is also a term used to describe collaboration between practitioner groups and local government, to jointly deliver services. As discussed during our webinar,

CoP members define and use co-production in different ways that include:

- involving service users in developing policies and making decisions on delivery priorities;
- training and guiding service users to support others, building on their unique understanding and experience of homelessness;
- at an organisational level, working jointly with local government to shape policy and deliver services to vulnerable individuals; and
- working with communities, such as the residents of informal settlements, to undertake research and generate knowledge.

While the specific form of co-production varies across organisations, it is about creating new spaces for joint working; recognising that people with experience of homelessness bring necessary and valuable insights into the challenges that practitioner organisations are trying to respond to. Involving service users in policy and service design can lead to more impactful targeting and delivery.

3. LEARNING POINTS

The route into co-production may start small for practitioner organisations, through consultation and user-led projects, to help understand the benefits and implications of co-production. These initial steps can be developed over time to become more significant, leading to inclusive management arrangements; activity to improve the impact of services for clients; or building community structures for collective action. The pace of the journey towards co-production depends on organisational goals and capacity.

Learning Point 1

Each practitioner organisation will need to define its own specific use of co-production, reflecting its own goals and capabilities. Adopting co-production may ultimately lead to radical change in the ethos and work of groups engaged in homelessness and insecure shelter issues, but is likely to start small, as organisations work to understand the benefits of co-production.

To understand how co-production might operates within an organisation requires:

- identifying where co-production adds value and how a rights-based and inclusive approach benefits the service user;
- building on existing strengths, such as user consultation, to extend participation

into management discussions and decision-making;

- finding specific opportunities to test and evaluate co-production on service operation; and
- ensuring that staff and service users are on-board, through clear communication and training.

Building on the CoP discussions, three themes are explored here: 3.1 - how to involve service users in co-production; 3.2 – co-production of knowledge to inform lobbying and service planning; and 3.3 - managing the challenges of co-production.

3.1 Service User Involvement in Co-production

Co-production is centred around a commitment to include and value individual experience of homelessness or insecure shelter in service delivery and management. The people that use services are a source of expertise and capacity that can inform and support the work of professionals.

Adopting the principles of co-production and working towards changing organisational approaches, to enable service user involvement in decision making, requires taking number of steps, including the following.

Learning Point 2

Introducing co-production is more than inviting service user feedback, it requires an organisational commitment to inclusion – opening up decision making processes to share power with service users.

- **Making an organisational commitment to co-production** – identify areas of organisation activity such as the design of information materials or service outreach to test co-production in practice.
- **Grow and embed co-production** – through activity such as reviewing policies and approaches to decision making to create spaces for user voices and involvement. Leadership is important at all levels to create an open and inclusive culture.
- **Building skills and confidence** – providing support to ensure users are able and comfortable to take part in decision making. Recognise the skills and expertise that individuals bring and extend these through peer learning, observation and direct experience, alongside structured training where necessary.
- **Establish a platform of trust** – open communication is fundamental to making co-production work. Starting with small areas of service activity, show that users voices will be listened to and joint decisions will be acted upon.

- **Plan for disruptions** – identify whether implementing co-production may take extra time or generate added costs and any potential implications for funders and managers.
- **Know what's working** – get feedback on and evaluate the impact of co-production to help refine and improve the approach. Co-production needs time to mature and will be informed by honest discussion.

The Homeless Link toolkit provides helpful information and guidance on applying the principles of co-production in homelessness services. It features the work of CoP member, the Booth Centre and their experiences of implementing co-production. Also, a report by the Greater Manchester CVO highlights the critical success factors for implementing co-production in VCSE (voluntary community and social enterprise) organisations.

Maintaining co-production during the Covid-19 pandemic has been particularly challenging for organisations working with people experiencing homelessness and insecure shelter. Limited access to computers and mobile technology has reduced the options for keeping people involved, but also encouraged new approaches to connecting with and including users in service delivery. As reported in Learning Brief 2, members of the CoP have been creative in using technology and Covid-19 safe arrangements to maintaining involvement. Through the CoP this has

included sharing practical advice on remote co-production during the pandemic – see Learning Point 3.

Learning Point 3

Stuart Hooper from Co-Lab Exeter provided helpful do's and don'ts on remote co-production.

- Do remember that volunteer stakeholders may not have the same reasons or opportunities to stay in touch with others as you might (through work networks, emails etc).
- Do send out regular email/post updates on what's going on. It's not the same as a conversation, but keeps stakeholders feeling involved and up to date.
- Don't let the lockdown dictate things. It's a challenge, but shouldn't automatically mean we are all isolated and 'that's just how it is'.
- Don't assume that stakeholders have other networks, friends and family - many rely on relationships made through co-production for mutual support, companionship etc.

The full post can be found on the CoP Forum.

3.2 Co-production of Knowledge

Gathering data and intelligence on the needs of people that are homeless or are living in insecure shelter is vital for advocacy and service planning. In many circumstances, such as the low income and informal settlements present in global South cities, marginalised populations are 'invisible' within official data, where government has little understanding of living conditions and needs of residents of these areas. Co-production of knowledge, where users are equal partners with professionals at all stages of research processes, generates shared intelligence useful for practitioner organisations and communities.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, accurate local data has been vital to implement public health safeguards. The co-production of knowledge has provided an important means of gathering information on the needs of low-income populations - drawing on existing community expertise, lived experience and local capacity. Members of the CoP, such as YUVA have used co-productive approaches to structure data gathering; providing insight into local impacts and responses to the pandemic.

Other examples also highlight how knowledge co-production provides an evidence base to hold public bodies to account. The Asivikelane initiative in South Africa has mobilised community members to track the availability of clean water, clean public toilets and waste removal during the pandemic. Working across 15 municipalities, the Asivikelane initiative creates a platform for residents of low-income settlements to challenge local government, to ensure that essential basic services are provided and upgrading is delivered.

Learning Point 4

The co-production of knowledge is a means to generate in-depth community level data. It is a mechanism to involve service users in policy and service design; creating a platform for engagement and collective action.

Knowledge co-production is also well established among members of the SDI global network, through the Know Your City programme of community-driven data gathering and research – see case study provided by CORC on enumerations – collecting key information to inform advocacy and settlement upgrading programmes.

The principles of knowledge co-production can be tailored to a variety of contexts, to involve service users and communities in collecting and analysing data to provide deep insights into the lived experience of people that have known homelessness and insecure shelter. Adopting knowledge co-

production should include the following elements.

- **Jointly defining research** – working with communities to identify key issues for investigation and designing simplified survey or qualitative methods that enable community members to take a lead role in data collection and analysis.
- **Good preparation** – demystifying research and data collection through training and practice-based learning with community or peer researchers.
- **Recognise the barriers to community participation** – through design of research address practical obstacles such as child care, limited mobility, lost earnings due to time on a project and through training, insecurity about a lack of skills to undertake research.
- **Ensure that evidence is open to scrutiny** – establishing opportunities for validation of research results helps strengthen the ownership of data within communities.
- **Take an inclusive approach** – in the design of knowledge co-production recognise that people have a range of perspectives on issues that may be shaped by their experiences and by gender, age and ethnicity.
- **Include community-led analysis and reporting** – co-production of knowledge doesn't stop at data collection, use inclusive approaches to interpreting and disseminating findings.

- **Reinforce shared ownership** – the process of knowledge co-production, as well as the outcomes, should benefit communities as well as organisations.

As an example of the method and approach to co-production of knowledge, the following case study of community-led household enumeration (household census) has been provided by one of our CoP members: Community Organisation Resource Centre (CORC). Their report, What You Can Count, Counts, provides a guide to community-led data collection for informal settlements.

Case Study
Household Enumeration, Sonop Settlement South Africa

CORC's work supports community members living in informal settlements to gather data about where they live. This method of data-gathering, known as profiling and enumeration (household census), is an established method for SDI affiliated organisations. The data gathered is used to lobby local government for infrastructure improvements, such as water and sanitation, but equally a mechanism to bring the community together for collective action. Shared learning, community-led research and analysis is empowering and strengthens the ability of communities to take ownership of development processes.

A settlement profile and an enumeration were completed by residents of the Sonop Informal Settlement and CORC South Africa in 2019. As illustrated below, the key stages were:

- **engaging and organising the community** – building a consensus for action focused on improving access to water and sanitation, discussions and planning to undertake the enumeration and ensuring that the community felt ownership of the process;
- **producing a settlement profile** – describing and defining the settlement, plotting housing units, identifying existing limitations in water and sanitation and community discussion of

the shared aspirations for the settlement;

- **community-led enumeration** – following training and joint design of questionnaires, house-to-house data collection to gather key socio-economic information and details of water and sanitation provision;
- **joint analysis of data** – building from a technical analysis of findings undertaken by CORC, community members are supported to interpret the data and prioritise recommendations; and
- **active dissemination** – community-led presentation to local government, using enumeration as evidence of need and the basis for joint action to improve water and sanitation provision.

Household Enumeration Process
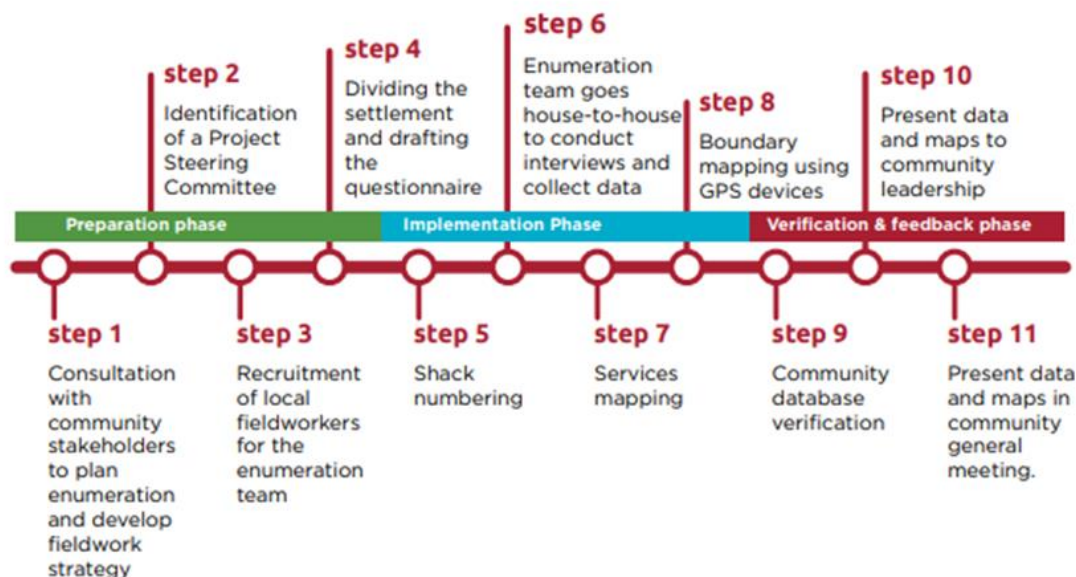
Source: CORC (2019) <u>What You Can Count, Counts</u>: A Guide to Community-led Data Collection for Informal Settlements.

The process of knowledge co-production is tailored to the specific needs and interests of the settlement, but follows a common process to involve and empower communities to own the research they generate and continue data gathering in the future. The learning provides a strong platform for leadership within communities and, in Sonop, a basis for on-going negotiation with government for settlement upgrading.

3.3 Managing the Challenges of Co-production

While co-production provides a basis for increased user involvement in service delivery and a method of community-led knowledge production, it is not without challenges. Establishing a culture of shared decision making and building experience of co-production can take time and may create tensions that need to be identified and managed.

- For practitioner organisations, it is important to define where and how user involvement will happen and the operational boundaries needed to keep activity focused. Balancing inclusion with a clear definition of roles and responsibilities is vital both for organisations and for service users to contribute effectively to co-production.
- Implementing co-production can highlight existing power imbalances between service users and professionals or between practitioner organisations and local government. As highlighted by Diana Mitlin in her webinar presentation, reconciling tensions can be challenging,

but is key to building strong relationships.
- Collective action through co-production provides a means to release capacity, but can also be seen as a short-cut to public budget reductions. Practitioner organisations should ensure that the added value of co-production is clear and that costs and responsibilities are not being passed onto communities or groups that can least meet them.

Learning Point 5

Alongside the benefits of co-production, organisations should also recognise and plan for the challenges. These can have significant effects on both the operation and the relationships of practitioner organisations.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The adoption of co-production brings a wide range of benefits for organisations tackling homelessness and insecure shelter. From initial steps of user involvement in decision making to more transformational changes to service management, co-production can help reveal the needs of people experiencing homelessness and strengthen the effectiveness of provision.

- **For policy** – co-production should be at the centre of public policy design, to provide new insights and new solutions to addressing complex issues of homelessness.

- **For practitioners** – the gradual adoption of co-production and involvement of service users in decision making and delivery can release the underused knowledge, capacity and experience of clients to improve the targeting and impact of provision.
- **For partnerships** – co-production should be used as a framework to organise contributions of government, practitioner organisations and people with experience of homelessness and insecure shelter.
- **For all** – as a principle and approach, co-production activates the rights of service users to be involved in the design of delivery of services targeted at them.

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5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Additional information and case studies on co-production and how it has been used in practice is available on the Community of Practice website.