P114 / From Participation to Co-Production: Interrogating Collaboration, Power and Influence in the Policy Process

Topic : Policy Process Theories

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Participation, collaboration and co-production have become central concepts in contemporary public policy, reflecting a shift from government-centred policymaking towards more interactive forms of governance involving citizens, civil society, communities, service users, professionals and other non-state actors. Yet these concepts are frequently used interchangeably, although they capture potentially different relationships between state and societal actors and different degrees of influence over policy processes.

The literature on participation has long shown that the presence of citizens does not translate into meaningful influence. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation conceptualised participation in terms of citizen power over decisions; Fung (2006, 2015) showed that participatory arrangements vary according to who participates, how they communicate and decide, and how participation connects to public action; and research on collaborative governance has identified institutional design, leadership, trust, power and resources as conditions of effective collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Co-production extends these debates by positioning societal actors as contributors to the design, delivery and assessment of policies and services (Ostrom, 1996; Nabatchi, Sancino & Sicilia, 2017), while systematic reviews point to persistent conceptual and empirical gaps, notably on outcomes (Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2015). Critical scholarship adds that co-production is not inherently empowering: it can reproduce inequalities and power asymmetries when its political dimension is neglected (Farr, 2018; Turnhout et al., 2020).

Two questions remain unresolved. First, whether participation, collaboration and co-production are distinct forms of policy engagement, points along a continuum, or alternative analytical lenses on state–society relations. Second, how far these concepts, largely developed from North American and European experiences, travel. In much of the Global South, co-production involves customary authorities, religious organisations, informal providers and donors rather than, or alongside, the citizen–agency dyad; participation unfolds in hybrid regimes where consequential influence rarely runs through formal institutional design; and the "state" that co-produces is itself plural and contested. These settings are not merely additional cases: they test the assumptions built into the concepts.

The panel therefore asks: how, when and under what conditions do participatory and collaborative arrangements produce substantive co-production and meaningful influence over public policy, and what do experiences from the Global South change in the way we answer this question?

It explores three propositions. P1: formal participatory arrangements that do not redistribute decision rights or resources tend to produce symbolic legitimacy rather than policy influence, whatever their design; P2: collaboration becomes co-production only where actors hold interdependent resources and where joint decision-making is institutionalised – including through non-state and customary institutions; and P3: the transformative potential of co-production depends less on the participatory format than on the prior distribution of political, institutional and material power, which such arrangements may conceal as much as correct.

The panel aims to advance conceptual clarity and empirical understanding of these modes of policymaking by bringing comparative and Global South perspectives into the core of the debate rather than at its margins.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical, conceptual, methodological and empirical papers that critically examine

participation, collaboration and co-production in public policy processes.

Rather than assuming that participation necessarily develops into collaboration and subsequently into co-production, the panel seeks papers that interrogate the relationships, distinctions and boundaries between these concepts. Contributions may examine whether they constitute different forms of policy engagement, different levels of influence, or alternative analytical perspectives on state–society interaction.

Papers may address participation and co-production at any stage of the policy process, including agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy design, implementation, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation. We particularly welcome studies examining how participatory and collaborative arrangements affect policy decisions, implementation processes and policy outcomes.

The panel is interested in questions including:

-What distinguishes meaningful participation from consultation, information-sharing or symbolic inclusion?
-When does collaboration become co-production?
-Does co-production necessarily involve a redistribution of power?
-How do institutional rules, political incentives, administrative capacity and leadership shape participation and collaboration?
-How do power asymmetries affect who participates, whose knowledge counts and whose preferences influence policy?
-Under what conditions does co-production improve policy legitimacy, responsiveness, implementation, learning or outcomes?
-Can participation and co-production reproduce rather than reduce existing inequalities?
-How can participation and co-production be conceptualised and empirically measured?
-How do these processes differ across policy sectors, political systems and levels of government?
-What can experiences from the Global South contribute to existing theories of participation, collaborative governance and co-production?

The panel particularly welcomes comparative, longitudinal, mixed-methods and theoretically informed empirical research. Contributions from Africa, Asia, Latin America and other under-researched contexts are encouraged, as are papers that challenge dominant assumptions within the participation and co-production literature.

The panel aims to bring together scholarship from policy process research, participatory governance, collaborative governance, policy implementation, deliberative governance, public administration and related fields to examine whether—and under what conditions—participation and collaboration translate into genuine co-production and meaningful policy influence.