

Public governance and the third sector: opportunities for co-production and innovation?

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1. Introduction

In the opening chapter to this volume, Stephen Osborne devotes an editorial overview of developments from New Public Management to the emergence of New Public Governance. He notes the increasingly inter-organizational nature of public management in a clearly plural and pluralist world, where the number of actors involved in policy formulation and implementation have grown dramatically. This chapter will focus on one type of actor, the third sector. Is it good to involve the third sector in public governance? Arguments and counter-arguments are often based on normative assumptions rather than empirical evidence, which remains fragmented and thin on the ground. The literature mentions several specific qualities or contributions that third sector organisations could theoretically have, as compared to state or commercial organisations. We will here explore the nature of those potential contributions.

The issue is especially relevant at a time when many countries in Europe have been searching for new ways to include the third sector in the provision and governance of social services. Of course, state-third sector collaboration is not a new phenomenon and goes back a long way. What we now call the ‘third sector’ provided public services before the state ever did and in many countries its involvement in the welfare state dates back as far as the 19th century. Public governance implies that multiple parties are involved in the delivery of health care, elderly care, education, housing, welfare, safety and other public goods. Recent decades have been marked by a re-arrangement of the relationships between the state and third sector organisations that supply public goods and services like education, housing, health care and community services. New third sector organisations have been drawn into public service provision; in other words, there has been an increase in co-management between third sector and state. In addition, those third sector organisations already in the public services have faced the challenges of quasi-marketisation and/or performance measurement. Long-term relationships based on trust have been replaced by short-term, contract-based relationships, changing the nature of the government-third sector partnership.

At a general level, the reasons for involving the third sector in public service delivery are similar throughout Europe. First is the challenge of an ageing population, second is the growing democracy deficit at all levels, local, regional, national and European, and third is the semi-permanent austerity in public finances. In any given EU member state, the reasons will

vary and may be more specific. However, taken together, they imply a major legitimacy crisis for the public sector as a provider of welfare services. It is in this context that the third sector came back into the spotlight as a provider of public services in welfare states where it traditionally did not have a major role; in those where it did, its role has been changing. As a result, third sector research has become increasingly intertwined with public management research, witnessed by various publications on the topic in the relevant journals and book series.

Another reason for the surge of interest in the third sector, paradoxically, is questions over its distinctiveness. The third sector comes under various other names, such as the voluntary sector, the (private) non-profit sector, the social economy, civil society, all with slightly different defining characteristics and with a large degree of overlap. When we here refer to the third sector, we include all those groups and organizations grouped under other labels, accepting that it is a ‘loose and baggy monster’ (Kendall and Knapp, 1995) without trying to cage it in. This has not deterred politicians from various backgrounds from embracing the sector as one of the cures for the welfare state’s ills. Yet the third sector is (in the context of public services) increasingly hard to get into focus. As a result of its involvement in public service delivery, and the contracting out and performance measurement that followed it, the traditional boundaries between market, state and third sector have been breaking down to the point where a class of indeterminate organizational hybrids has emerged (Evers, 2005; Brandsen e.a., 2005). It means that the third sector organizations have taken on more characteristics of state organizations (e.g. in terms of formalization) and of market organizations (e.g. maximizing their income, but without maximizing their profit). Although no organization can be regarded as ‘pure’, many organizations now reach the point where the ideal types state, market or third sector no longer help us to truly understand them.¹

Within this context, we will explore what role the third sector can play in the public services. None of these roles are exclusive to the third sector and there are good grounds to challenge whether it has a specific contribution to make –indeed, whether the third sector concept is

¹ Indeed, some authors have defined the third sector as essentially hybrid, an indefinable area that as yet lacks a distinct identity (Brandsen, Van de Donk and Putters, 2005). It could even be argued that the third sector is better understood in terms of certain aspects of public services, rather than as a distinct cluster of organizations (Evers, 2005; Brandsen, Dekker & Evers, 2009).

truly useful. This chapter will argue that, if we are to judge the distinct contribution of the third sector to service delivery, an analysis should take account of the institutional framework within which it operates. Blanket statements on the specific nature of the third sector tend to be simplistic and this is why further comparative work is needed. In the current chapter, we will lay out some basic concepts along which a comparative analysis could be organised.

In the next paragraph, we will discuss the state of the art in research on this topic and conclude that there are two possible benefits of third sector involvement in public service delivery. We examine the first in paragraph three, exploring the concept of co-production and its potential to democratise service delivery. In paragraph four we go on to describe the potential contribution of the third sector, which is to be a generator of innovation within the structure of service provision. In both cases we will illustrate our point with empirical evidence, though we should emphasize we do not claim to present a comprehensive literature review. The chapter ends with suggestions for future research.

2. The different roles of the third sector

2.1. The state of the art

Various theoretical traditions have addressed the role of the third sector in public service delivery, each with their own strengths and drawbacks. We will here briefly describe the three main traditions: third sector research, public management research and comparative welfare state research, including references to some key literature on the topic.

What is called ‘third sector research’ is a very mixed bag. Assumptions and theories about the specific strengths of third sector organisations in relation to service delivery have been manifold. They generally concern four roles: (a) in community integration; (b) in giving the respective groups a voice; (c) in pioneering innovations in service provision that address groups, situations and/or needs neglected by states and markets (d) their complementary role in enhancing the qualities of established public services (Zimmer & Stecker, 2004; Evers & Laville, 2004; Nyssens e.a., 2006). Past research has demonstrated convincingly at the macro-level that state-third sector relationships may benefit both sides (Gidron e.a. 1992; Salamon, 1995) and there is now a diverse body of theory on the topic (Smith & Grønbjerg, 2006). There is also a good working knowledge on specific issues of third sector management, such as the management of volunteers and board composition (Cornforth, 2003). However, third

sector research has been less successful in demonstrating that, within these arrangements, the distinctive strengths of the third sector have really been addressed. Has its output differed qualitatively from that of other types of organisations?

Research in public management has by now examined quite extensively how service delivery by non-governmental organisations is organised and how this affects the nature of the relationships. For example, there is work on the effects of national compacts, the effects of contracting out services and the role of these organisations in networks of service provision (Brandsen, 2004; Osborne, 2008). There has also been much attention specific issues of concern to public management within the context of third sector involvement, such as accountability (Kumar, 2003), innovation (Osborne, Chew & McLaughlin., 2008) and partnership (Carmel & Harlock 2008). This literature has been useful in clarifying the dynamics of government-third sector relationships, with more attention to processes at the meso- and micro-level. Yet, as in third sector research, only some of it has been explicitly comparative (e.g. Bode, 2008), between sectors and /or between welfare systems, which makes general statements on the functions of the third sector rather tricky.

Mainstream welfare state research has for the past decades largely ignored the third sector, as it has come to be dominated by the concept of welfare regimes (Kuhnle & Selle, 1992). This has been beneficial in encouraging comparative research, but the third sector was left out of the original typologies formulated by Titmuss that were subsequently revised by Esping-Andersen (cf. Titmuss, 1974; Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Esping-Andersen typology distinguished liberal, conservative and social-democratic welfare states. Research on regimes tends to focus on national income transfer, whereas most government-third sector partnerships concern services at the local level. Finally, the regime approach has mostly disregarded the issue of service quality, where the third sector's distinctive characteristics are more likely to be relevant. In short, what this tradition of research leaves us is a good understanding of the macro-context with their rather implicit assumptions about why third sector inputs are not so important, but little of the micro-dynamics (Pestoff, Osborne & Brandsen, 2006).

Each of these traditions can contribute to an analysis of the functions of the third sector in relation to public service delivery. As noted above, several potential benefits of third sector involvement emerge from the literature. Please note that we are not necessarily stating that these benefits always occur and that involving the third sector is always good. That would be

an altogether normative perspective. Our purpose is to specify the supposed benefits and encourage research into the conditions under which they materialise.

On the basis of previous third sector research, one could roughly classify the possible benefits of involving the sector in public service provision in terms of two main functions: democratisation and innovation. This is where third sector organisations may have an edge over their public or commercial counterparts. However, one cannot simply transplant the abstract functions as posited by third sector research to public governance. They need to be reinterpreted within in the specific context of public service delivery, where they take on a meaning that overlaps, but is not necessarily the same as that within a purely voluntaristic context. For instance, the third sector supposedly contributes to the good functioning of democracy, but what does that mean when it is working within a system governed by representative democratic institutions? Or if certain organisations improve their services for their particular clients and differences in quality emerge, how does that fit in systems where everyone is entitled to services of the same quality?

2.2. Co-production and collective innovation

This is why we have re-interpreted the potential contributions of the third sector in two ways. Democratisation will be understood in terms of *co-production*, direct participation by citizens in service delivery. *Innovation* will here be understood as the ability to renew the collective structure of service provision, whether it be in terms of skills, activities or even the underlying paradigm. These are the two distinctive contributions to service delivery identified by third sector research.² Public management research has helped to better understand the effect of government policy on each of these two types of contributions. Comparative welfare state research can help us to understand within their macro-institutional context: which institutional conditions favour which functions and where does the third sector have which role? The role of citizens and the third sector will vary among welfare regimes, with their different emphasis on individual or collective provision of social services and with different policies that focus on public, private or third sector provision of welfare services. Let us now explore this variation, in relation to the two functions of co-production and innovation.

² It is clear that these two benefits can be empirically related, but they differ conceptually in that the former relates to the community as the primary object of analysis, whereas the latter is foremost about the system that produces services

Co-production is one of several mechanisms that can be used to increase the influence of citizens over the services that are delivered to them. Evers (1998) argues that there are four concepts for strengthening the position of users in service delivery. They are: a) representative political democracy, b) participative democracy, c) consumerism, and d) involvement of the co-producer. The first concept relies in the indirect power of citizens as voters and their elected representatives. This refers to shaping the service sector according to the interests of society as a whole, not for a particular group. The second concept stems from a long history of self-organization, linked to the church, cooperatives, the labour movement, and other types of self-help groups and new social movements. This helps to offset the limits of parliamentary democracy and re-energize established voluntary organizations providing social services. There might, however, be a conflict between representative and participative democracy, and between a public interest with its universal rules and the concerns of particular groups striving for a specific solution of their needs. The third concept, consumerism, claims to bring more democracy through market-like arrangements in social services. Given time limits, it can provide a quick fix, rather than requiring citizen involvement in providing public services. Finally, it is the involvement of co-producers, like parent participation in schools and day care, which promises to empower consumers and reduce the gap between the professionals and their clientele (*ibid*: 43-46).

Evers argues for a pluralistic or mixed approach of using several different pathways for democratizing the delivery of services (*ibid*: 47-50). All welfare regimes and government policy can in their own way facilitate greater citizen participation and a greater role for the third sector in the provision and governance of social services. Yet the differences between welfare regimes and differences in the sectoral context are important in how this is done and where the role of the third sector is most distinctive –in other words, where it has a clear added benefit in relation to democratisation. This is particularly the case in social-democratic welfare states where the third sector is least integrated in the established system of public service delivery as compared to its position in other regimes, and therefore paradoxically in a better position to be responsive to specific demands than governments.

Innovation, the ability to bring something new to service delivery has been one of the chief justifications for involving the third sector. But what is innovation exactly? We will here define it as a significant change in the process of the ‘production’ of services. Whereas co-production refers to whom is involved in the process, innovation concerns to the qualities (in

a neutral sense) of the service itself. It is of course possible to distinguish different kinds of innovation, depending, for instance, on the aspects of the service that are changed or the structure of the process of change.³ We will here keep matters simple, for reasons of space. We should also note that innovation is not necessarily always good: sometimes it is better to maintain the status quo and not allocate resources to changes that are not needed.

An important point is that innovation itself is not sufficient in the context of public services. There must also be a process that makes such innovations accessible to a broader range of users. After all, the major disadvantage of the third sector (at least from the perspective of *public* service delivery) is its particularistic nature, restricting improved quality to a select group of users. Indeed, this was historically one of the chief arguments for supporting a greater role of the state in financing and delivering welfare state services. In other words, whether innovation is a useful function of third sector organisations depends not only on the performance of single organisations, but the ability of the overall field of organisations to transfer and adopt it. We will therefore conceptualise innovation as a *collective* process.

We will now proceed to discuss these two themes in more detail, describing the basic concepts and sketching some of the empirical evidence relating to them. Please note again that we are neither making prior assumptions concerning the value of the third sector's contribution, but rather whittling down the variety of its potential contributions towards manageable and measurable concepts, for the systematic empirical research on the topic that is so badly needed.⁴

3. Co-production: citizen participation in service delivery

³ Osborne (2008) distinguishes between total innovation (involving working with a new client group and providing new services), expansionary innovation (involving working with a new client group, but using the existing services/methods of work of the organization), evolutionary innovation (involving working with the same client group, but providing new services), and incremental development (involving working with the same client group and providing the same services, but incrementally improving them).

⁴ It might be argued that our presentation could be strengthened by separating the analysis of the third sector in instrumental terms as a service deliverer from participatory approaches, where the third sector can perhaps enhance democratic participation. Each approach could then be presented independently. However, we feel that these two approaches are often implicitly or explicitly linked and sometimes inseparable. Therefore, we introduce each concept separately and present some initial empirical evidence for each within the same presentation. We deem it feasible for readers to distinguish between the two and choose, therefore, not to present these two streams of analysis separately in independent chapters for reasons of space and clarity.

3.1. *The co-production concept*

Hirst (2002) argued that big organizations on either side of the public/private divide in advanced post-industrial societies leave little room for democracy or citizen influence. This is due to the lack of local control and democratic processes for internal decision-making in most big organizations. Evers (2006) maintained that user involvement in welfare services is a general concern throughout Europe and that there are at least five different approaches to their involvement. They are partially overlapping and partially conflicting. They range from welfarism and professionalism, through consumerism and managerialism to what he calls participationalism. They are based on different values and promote different degrees of user involvement. These approaches will vary among sectors and over time. Their mix will probably differ among countries. Welfarism and professionalism are closely associated with each other and neither leaves much room for user involvement. Rather, clients are viewed as people with little competence of their own. Consumerism and managerialism call for giving users greater choice through more exit options and argue that the public sector needs to learn from the private sector (*ibid.*). However, they leave little room for voice or participation.

Participationalism encourages on-site participation by users of welfare services, based on the belief that citizens should engage personally in shaping the welfare services they demand. It emphasizes multi-stakeholder organizations and requires that users become co-producers. Welfarism and professionalism are usually promoted by social democratic governments, while consumerism and managerialism are normally championed by rightist governments. However, participationalism, or more simply co-production, lacks clear political proponents in most EU countries. In a service democracy of either the social democratic or rightist variety citizens are the consumers of public financed social services provided by municipal authorities, regional governments and private companies. They vote every fourth year and in the meantime they choose between various public or private service providers. This contrast with views of participative democracy in which citizens are engaged in the provision of some of their own social services.

This is the background against which the concept of *co-production* has developed. The notion of citizen involvement in the provision of public services generated much interest among public administration scholars in America in the 1970s and the 1980s (see Parks, *et al.* 1981 & 1999, for a good overview). It experienced somewhat of a revival with the publication at the turn of the century of a paper on incentives structures for co-production in Australian

public services (Alford, 2002) and in recent work on the Swedish welfare state (notably Pestoff, 2006; Vamstad, 2007). It was originally developed by the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University. During the 1970s they struggled with the dominant theories of urban governance underlying policy recommendations of massive centralization. Scholars and public officials argued that citizens as clients would receive more effective and efficient services if they were delivered by professional staff employed by a large bureaucratic agency. But, this group of researchers found no empirical support for such claims promoting centralization (Ostrom, 1999, p. 358).

They did, however, stumble on several myths of public production. One was the notion of a single producer being responsible for urban services within each jurisdiction. In fact, they normally found several agencies, as well as private firms, producing services. More important, they also realized that the production of a service, in contrast to goods, was difficult without the active participation of those receiving the service. They developed the term *co-production* to describe the potential relationship that could exist between the “regular” producer (street-level police officers, schoolteachers, or health workers) and “clients” who want to be transformed by the service into safer, better-educated or healthier persons. In complex societies there is a division of labour and most persons are engaged in full-time production of goods and services as regular producers. However, individual consumers or groups of consumers may also contribute to the production of goods and services, as consumer-producers. This mixing may occur directly or indirectly. Co-production is, therefore, noted by the mix of activities that both public service agents and citizens contribute to the provision of public services. The former are involved as professionals or “regular producers”, while “citizen production” is based on voluntary efforts of individuals or groups to enhance the quality and/or quantity of services they receive (Parks, *et al.*, 1981 & 1999). Co-production is one way that a synergy could occur between what a government does and what citizens do (Ostrom, 1999).

3.2. Empirical evidence

There is a lot of work on citizen participation, but relatively little in the context of service delivery. The TSFEPS Project⁵ examined the relationship between parent participation in the

⁵ The TSFEPS Project, Changing Family Structures & Social Policy: Childcare Services as Sources of Social Cohesion, took place in eight European countries between 2002-04. See www.emes.net for details and reports. The eight countries were: Belgium, Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden.

provision and governance of childcare in eight EU countries (Pestoff, 2006 & 2008). It found different levels of parent participation in different countries and in different forms of provision, i.e., public, private for-profit and third sector childcare. The highest levels of parent participation were found in third sector providers, like parent associations in France, parent initiatives in Germany, and parent cooperatives in Sweden. Different kinds of parent participation (i.e., economic, political and social) were readily evident in third sector providers of childcare services, while both economic and political participation were highly restricted in municipal and private for-profit services (*ibid.*). Later, Vamstad (2007) confirmed the existence of these three dimensions of co-production in Swedish childcare and underlined clear differences between types of providers concerning the saliency of these dimensions in providing welfare services (Pestoff, 2008). This provides parents with unique possibilities for active participation in the management and running of their child(ren)'s childcare facility and for unique opportunities to become active co-producers of high quality childcare services for their own and others' children. It is also clear that other forms of childcare allow for some limited avenues of co-production in publicly financed childcare, but that the parents' possibilities for influencing the management of such services remains rather limited.

In other words, existing empirical work appears to indicate that participation by individual citizens is best facilitated by third sector providers. What is less clear is why exactly this is the case and under what conditions co-production is most likely to be effective. So far, research on the topic has been conducted primarily (though not exclusively) in the context of social-democratic welfare regimes where service delivery is dominated by state provision. In such regimes, the third sector is least integrated within the structure of public service provision, which is arguably why co-production appears to function best within third sector organisations. Sweden seems to be fertile ground for co-production (interestingly, this is the same country where the IKEA model of production originated, although there is no obvious connection). The objective for future comparative research is to determine how well co-production functions in other kinds of welfare state regimes.

4. Innovations in public service delivery

4.1. The nature of innovation

Earlier, we defined innovation as a significant change in the process of production. A lot of third sector literature appears to assume that the organisations in this domain are innovative by nature. After a review of the literature, Osborne (1998) concluded that studies on this topic relied on normative argument rather than empirical data, were insufficiently aware of mainstream innovation studies literature and failed to understand the contingencies of innovation, especially the impact of the public policy environment upon innovativeness. He argued that innovation emerges from the interaction of third sector organizations with their institutional and policy environments. As we will show, there is some evidence to support the latter claim.

A favourable institutional environment may not only be necessary to engender innovation within particular organisations, but also to make sure that it spreads across to all other organisations. In this context, it is worth turning to DiMaggio and Powell's (1991) classic study on isomorphism. They suggested that, once organisations are structured into a field, forces come into play which encourage similarity. In each organisational field there are a few true innovators who have the desire and the capacity to improve their performance by coming up with innovations. Other organisations will copy the ideas of these innovators, rather than innovate themselves. Particular innovations will thus gradually spread throughout the field. The aggregate effect of change will be diminished diversity, if not outright homogeneity, in the community that shares the innovations. One of the mechanisms through which this drive towards homogeneity occurs is imitation. Organisations voluntarily copy strategic elements from other organisations in their field ("mimetic isomorphism"). Another way is for people with similar educational backgrounds to come to dominate within fields of organisations ("normative isomorphism"). As they become more widespread, the innovations become more legitimate simply because they are widespread. Finally, the state or other powerful bodies in the environment may force organisations to adopt particular changes ("coercive isomorphism"). Whether and how such mechanisms affect the third sector is a significant empirical question, because, as far as innovation is concerned, it determines their significance to the public sector.

4.2. Empirical evidence

There is little systematic empirical work on the innovative capacity of third sector organisations. The study by Osborne which we quoted earlier examined organisations in social welfare in the UK and found that the '*policy context created by central and local*

government that encouraged innovative activity by VCOs rather than, it being an inherent consequence of their organizational structure or culture' (Osborne, Chew & McLaughlin, 2008). Public policy was an important determinant of the extent and nature of innovation. Future research should further investigate the conditions under which government policy can be conducive to innovation. Research from the Netherlands shows evidence of a link between hybridisation and innovation. As service providers become more hybrid, and given that they have sufficient autonomy, they appear to start taking initiatives to reconcile the tension between their market, state and community characteristics. Such initiatives may be presented as 'a focus on communities', 'demand-driven supply', 'putting the customer central', borrowing from both market or third sector discourse, or both. In terms of organisational theory, it comes down to a strategy of diversification, possibly (though not necessarily) accompanied by a cognitive change in how the problems they need to solve are framed. This implies that organisations start to expand into new areas of activity where they believed their clients could be served better. Such diversification may even lead to a revision of the organisational mission. In an earlier article (Brandsen & Van Hout, 2006) we examined the example of social housing, where social landlords gradually moved from a classical role of merely renting out their property on the basis of individual contracts to leading members in programmes of urban regeneration and community investment. They went beyond their original (bureaucratically defined) function and adopted a more holistic perspective, in which they would 'revitalise communities' or something similar, treating their housing stock as a means rather than an end. This diversification may constitute an innovation at the level of the structure of service provision, if it is adopted throughout the field.

The second dimension of innovation concerns whether such strategies can spread beyond single organisations. In the context of public services, it is obvious that governments play an important role in disseminating innovation, by imposing ('mainstreaming') desired changes in service provision through regulation. The role of coercive isomorphism hardly needs mentioning in this context. There are theoretical reasons to suppose that the other types of isomorphism are less strong in the third sector than among other types of organisations, because it generally has a lower level of professionalisation and is less tightly organised. However, they may be at play where third sector organisations are tightly integrated in local and/or functional networks of service delivery. If innovation is interpreted as a collective effort, then it is the outcome of networks rather than organisations, in the same sense that it

would be for complex technological innovation (Powell e.a., 1996). For instance, a case study in social housing in The Netherlands demonstrated that, although most organisations lacked a basic capacity to develop new ideas, the organisational field as a whole could progress because innovations by frontrunners were massively copied (Brandson, 2004). Within such a type of analysis, the process of innovation is conceived of as an interaction between organisations and the networks they belong to (just as co-production emerges from the interaction of the organisation and individual citizens).

If integration into public service networks is conducive to isomorphism, then the third sector has been most important to innovation in those institutional regimes where it is best embedded and where it traditionally plays a pivotal role. This applies primarily to Bismarckian or conservative welfare states and to a lesser extent to Anglo-Saxon ones (even though the role of the third sector in the latter has often been understated).

5. Conclusion

In public governance, the third sector has come to play a more important role in public service delivery. Yet, despite many popular assertions, there is as yet only limited empirical evidence on the actual contribution of the third sector. This is not to say that it has none, simply that the available material refers to case studies (e.g. Titmuss' famous work from 1970 on blood donations) and that few studies have systematically analysed the performance of the third sector under different conditions and in comparison with other types of providers. Such work as there is shows mixed results. It is imperative to continue and expand these studies over the coming years.

The conditions for setting up such a comparative programme are better than they have been for a long time. There are now various third sector research centres throughout Europe, which are connected through various cross-national research networks. In public management research, the third sector has become an established subtheme and one that benefits from the interest in new public governance. This will hopefully result in systematic comparative research into the benefits and drawbacks of the third sector's involvement in public service delivery, and perhaps in a debate that is based more on evidence and less on normative assumptions.

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