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Co-creation for sustainability

SDG 17 as a lever of change

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Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Ansell, C., Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2022, Jan 23). Co-creation for sustainability: SDG 17 as a lever of change. Emerald Group Publishing. <https://emeraldopenresearch.com/documents/4-3>

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CO-CREATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY: SDG 17 AS A LEVER OF CHANGE



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Executive Summary

We need to step up our efforts to achieve the UN's ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In this policy brief, we argue that co-creation provides an ideal strategy for mobilizing local actors and fostering innovative public value solutions that can tackle the complex problems that inform the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). More specifically, our account includes:

- An optimistic account of the prospect for SDG action in the post-corona era
- A clear definition of co-creation and a demonstration of its affinity with SDG 17
- An explanation of the beneficial effects of co-creation
- 10 recommendations for how to foster locally co-created sustainability solutions
- Action points for governments aiming to spur local co-creation for sustainability

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Introduction

How to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

The COVID-19 pandemic has delivered a giant blow to the attempt to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set an ambitious agenda for the entire planet. However, the pandemic seems to have produced a global awareness that we are all—from Moscow and Madrid to Caracas and Cape Town—facing common threats and problems that we can only fight together and through global action. We can hope that this new awareness will encourage public and private changemakers around the world to work even harder and help them to engage even more people in collective

efforts to address the urgent challenges to sustainability and social justice that lie behind the SDGs.

How can local changemakers accomplish the formidable task of saving the world from the current sustainability crisis while making sure that no one is left behind? Without denying the importance of other levels of governance, we argue that local changemakers are particularly well positioned to leverage the proximity and interdependence between actors at the local level to co-create innovative solutions to our sustainability crisis.

Findings

Co-creation

In our reading, SDG 17 implicitly recommends a co-creation approach to achieving sustainability because it emphasizes the central role of partnerships. Formed by public and private actors who realize that they can achieve more by collaborating than working individually, partnerships can serve as “force multipliers” to generate more powerful sustainability solutions. They can mobilize collective energy, harness distributed knowledge and resources, engage in processes of mutual learning, develop and test prototypes and implement new and bold solutions that they jointly evaluate and seek to improve. In short, they are co-creating public value by fostering innovative solutions that are valuable to the public and that the public values (Ansell and Torfing, 2021).

Co-creation—perceived as the collaborative effort of relevant and affected actors to define common problems and design and implement innovative solutions that produce public value—is an ideal strategy for achieving the SDGs. First, co-creation encourages inclusive participation of manifold public and private actors. By drawing together the varied perspectives of citizens, community groups and civil society organizations, co-creation fosters nuanced problem understandings and mobilizes the local knowledge, resources and energies crucial for context-sensitive local solutions. Second, co-creation builds on distributed action

and leadership that can enlarge local capacities for action and complement and strengthen the often overcommitted and underfunded local public sector. Through co-creation processes, private businesses, civil society organizations and local communities can inject new dedication and energy into local efforts, sometimes taking the lead in agenda setting as well as designing and backing new ideas. Finally, co-creation engages participating actors in collaborative processes that stimulate learning and innovation based on an ongoing cross-fertilization of ideas and a shared responsibility for the risks associated with implementing new and bold ideas.

Co-creation is a welcome alternative to public governance based on bureaucratic command and control as well as to market-based governance involving competition between private businesses. Whereas the former often has a limited reach and fails to understand changing conditions of the ground, the latter is often more concerned with ensuring private profitability at the expense of public value production. By contrast, co-creation seeks to involve local actors in crafting needs-based solutions and insists that solutions should serve the general public and respond to planetary challenges. Local co-creation is particularly important for delivering on the ‘leave no one behind’ emphasizing the need for sustainability solution to be inclusive and non-discriminatory.

The beneficial impacts of co-creation

When co-creating networks and partnerships realize their potential, they are not only capable of producing innovative, yet feasible, solutions that help promoting sustainable living. They also help to build a broad-based ownership to new and bold solutions, thus enhancing democratic legitimacy. Finally, collaborative interaction in co-creation arenas tends to empower the participating actors and build resilient communities that are capable of bouncing back when facing stress, turbulence and disruptive crises (Ansell and Torfing, 2021).

A major condition for achieving these benefits is that the public and private actors engaged in co-creation come to trust each other’s intentions and competences. Trust is a condition for openly sharing problems, ideas and resources in the solutions phase and finding ways of sharing benefits, gains and risks in the implementation phase. Trust-based collaboration is enhanced by informal social interaction and transparent ground rules, but breaches of trust may occur and require swift restorative action.

Recommendations

Taking into account the overall benefits that may accrue from co-creating sustainability, the question becomes how to stimulate co-creation of the SDGs and how to drive co-creation processes to a successful conclusion. Our new book *Co-creation for Sustainability* (Emerald, forthcoming) aims to answer this pertinent question. Let us summarize a few of the many recommendations that we elaborate in the book.

1. Translate the global SDGs to the local context to enhance relevance and generate attention
2. Create institutional platforms and arenas that reduce the transaction costs of collaborating
3. Convene relevant and affected actors based on stakeholder analysis and appealing story lines
4. Spur mutual learning and innovation by working hard to escape the complacency trap
5. Develop and test prototypes to minimize the risk of failure and learn from problems
6. Build ownership to new solutions through participation of downstream actors
7. Use blended-finance to pay for investment in and operation of new solutions
8. Use developmental evaluation to ensure critical scrutiny and adaptation throughout
9. Exercise transformational, distributive and integrative leadership to motivate participants
10. Use social accountability to enhance democratic legitimacy

What can governments do to enhance co-creation of sustainability?

Applying the above recommendations provides no guarantee of successful co-creation of innovative sustainability solutions. Situational leadership aiming to diagnose problems and obstacles and to try out different solutions is called for and will often trump any list of recommendations.

Local changemakers might not even get as far as initiating, leading and managing co-creation processes. Governments, economic elites and local power-holders may suppress social entrepreneurship and unsolicited social action. Fortunately, in many parts of the world, governments welcome bottom-up initiatives that help them solve urgent problems and achieve important sustainability goals such as those captured by the SDGs.

On a final note, let us take a brief look at what sympathetic governments can do to spur co-creation for sustainability.

First, governments at all levels must demonstrate their political commitment to achieving the SDGs, for example by prioritizing goals, setting their own targets, and measuring and monitoring progress.

Second, they must build institutional platforms that attract the right actors, help them to form local arenas and provide seed money to cover initial expenses.

Third, they may create national support centers for collaborative innovation and encourage researchers

from public universities and other research institutions to disseminate knowledge about sustainable solutions to local projects. Creating training programs for local entrepreneurs may boost the local capacities for co-creating results.

Fourth, they must themselves participate in co-creation arenas on an equal footing with the other actors, while at the same time offering to play an active role in leading and managing co-creation processes. Local government may enhance their reach and problem solving capacity by participating in local co-creation processes.

Finally, turning co-creation into a key instrument for public governance in turbulent times will require a paradigm shift. Governments must make a mental shift from perceiving the public sector as an almighty authority capable of regulating society or an efficient service provider competing for contracts and customers with private service providers, to recasting the public sector as platform and arena for co-creation. Such a paradigm shift will bring us close to what researchers refer to as 'generative governance' (Ansell and Torfing, 2021), which is a new type of public governance that instead of trying to solve all problem through public money and exercise of authority aims to create meeting points for relevant and affected actors interested in co-creation solutions.

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