

## SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL SERVICES – A CO-PRODUCTION PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Purpose:** This study aims to identify management practices that enhance the provision of social services through co-production. It is based on the assumption that co-produced social services align with the sustainability paradigm.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study's objectives were achieved through a comprehensive literature review and a field survey conducted in December 2022. The survey utilized a questionnaire distributed to 357 local government units (LGUs) functioning as municipalities. To ensure a representative sample that included all types of units, stratified random sampling was employed. These LGUs were distinguished by their classification within a NUTS macro-region. The sampling strata were designed to ensure comparability across macro-regions, with each stratum reflecting the diversity of institutions, categorized into urban municipality offices, urban-rural municipality offices, and rural municipality offices. A limitation of the methodology is the potential for ambiguous interpretations of research questions, leading to responses that may not fully align with the actual conditions. Future research should aim to deepen these findings through qualitative methods.

**Findings:** The study identified key determinants that influence the collaboration between municipalities and organizations involved in social service provision, whether in the market or civil sectors.

**Research Limitations/Implications:** The study has several limitations. First, the reliance on self-reported data from LGUs may introduce bias, as respondents might present their practices more favorably. Second, the focus on Poland limits the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different political, social, and economic conditions.

**Implications:** The findings suggest that co-produced social services can foster sustainability. Sustainable co-production involves the continuous and meaningful engagement of service users in the design and delivery of services, moving beyond sporadic efforts to establish long-term relationships between professionals and service users. The sustainability of social service provision refers to the ability of involved organizations to adapt to changes in policy, funding, or the needs and preferences of service users.

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**Originality/Value:** The research underscores that building relationships with social service providers significantly contributes to meeting social needs effectively, fostering sustainable practices, and making communities more responsive to citizen needs. Enhancing sensitivity to citizen needs is a crucial expectation of municipalities.

**Keywords:** public management; public governance, social services, co-production, ecosystem.

**Category of the paper:** scientific article.

## 1. Introduction

In public management theory and practice, there has been a steady increase in interest in the organization and functioning of the social services system (Osborne, 2010, 2021; Osborne et al., 2015; Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2014; Frączkiewicz-Wronka, Ćwiklicki, 2022; Grewiński, 2021, Lara Montero, 2021). A clear definition of the term 'social services' is difficult. Besides the universal aspect, which includes services mandated by EU law, the range of social services can vary significantly depending on each country's social policy model and social welfare model (Grewiński, 2021). These factors determine which services are definitively classified as social services.

In general, social services, as a specific type of public service, relate to creating the foundation for socio-economic development. They aim to meet human needs and enhance the quality of life for individuals and society as a whole. According to A. Sen, Nobel laureate in Economics, the quality of life is more effectively improved by expanding social services rather than solely increasing real per capita income (Sen, 1999). Thus, social services are a crucial development factor, influencing changes in social and economic systems (Janoś-Kresło, 2002) and drawing interest from both national authorities and supranational entities (Grewiński, 2024).

Social services mainly refer to the provision of publicly funded benefits by the state in areas such as education, culture, recreation, social housing, welfare, public safety, and healthcare (Rogozinski, 2000). As M. Grewinski (2021) observes, the EU and individual countries consider the development of social services as a public investment that should enhance opportunities, equality, and growth for various social groups, thereby improving the quality of life. This perspective is reflected in modern economic indicators, which now include measures of social welfare (Bąkiewicz, 2010). The organization of systems that meet collective social needs significantly influences socio-economic development, understood as, for example, access to education, culture, health care, child and elderly care, community relations, and social capital. Ineffective provision of social services can undermine or hinder prosperity (Iwankiewicz-Rak, 2012). Moreover, the development of social services is seen as a response to key modern societal changes, including demographic shifts, civilizational advances, social

transformations, technological progress, climate change, migration, and globalization (Evers et al., 2013).

For many years, democratic European governments have actively sought to improve social services. Initiatives to strengthen social action began in 1974 with the Council of the European Economic Community and continue today with both the European Union and global social policy actors. The primary document outlining universal principles for organizing social service provision is the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, adopted by the United Nations in 2015 (United Nations, 2015). Although this is not exclusively an EU document, the EU has significantly contributed to its formulation and is committed to implementing its solutions in member states. The "2030 Agenda" comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets that countries aim to achieve in shaping their socio-economic development policies. Many of these goals (e.g., goals 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, and 17) are directly linked to the European Pillar of Social Rights (www1).

Sustainable development entails meeting present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs. In relation to social services, an important tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is the European Pillar of Social Rights. This document has been accepted by the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission at the Gothenburg Social Summit in November 2017. It emphasizes the EU's commitment to building a fairer and more social Europe (European Commission (2019), *Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030*. COM(2019) 22 of 30 January 2019). The commitment to implementing 20 key principles and rights, categorized into equal opportunities and access to employment, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion, necessitates the preparation and implementation of legal, financial, and awareness-raising instruments within public governance practices (Inter-institutional Proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, OJ.EU.C.2017.428.10). The implementation of sustainable development goals is a crucial aspect of public management. In each EU member state, public management practices regarding the organizational and functional dimensions of social service provision are integral to EU social policy. This policy framework is shaped by strategic guidelines and framework publications and is supported by targeted funding, primarily through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the 2021-2027 period.

In the welfare states, which European countries belong to, social services are fundamentally the responsibility of the state, driven by systemic, political, social, property, economic, and financial reasons. Economic and financial issues are particularly pertinent (Owsiak, 2021), as the provision of social services requires substantial financial resources that only public authorities can typically secure. The local authority, as the entity directly obligated to provide social services, is best positioned to understand, and address the needs of local communities with public funds.

In the public sector, there is a search for organizational solutions that, when implemented efficiently and equitably, can address these challenges and increasingly complex needs of citizens. Discovering new methods for delivering social services is essential, especially given the fundamental economic challenge of resource constraints. From a public management perspective, this involves adopting management practices that enable the efficient and effective delivery of high-quality social services. This raises questions about the roles of the market, third sector, civil society, and service users in designing, organizing, delivering, and evaluating social service outcomes (Evers, 2005).

## 2. Co-production of social services

The primary issue in social service delivery today is not the presence of the state but how responsibilities are shared between public, private, and civil sector actors. It is crucial to design service delivery processes that meet citizen and stakeholder expectations and stimulate their involvement at all stages (Linders, 2012).

From a public management perspective, our focus currently is on service co-production. Co-production, as a collaborative approach, can significantly improve social service delivery, making it more effective, efficient, and sustainable (Boyle, Harris, 2009). Co-production involves the design, organization, delivery, and evaluation of social services through collective processes. While the concept has been around for decades, interest in co-production has surged recently due to several reasons.

First, improved service quality is one of the key benefits of co-production (McMullin, Needham, 2018). According to an OECD report, "Together for Better Public Services: Partnering with Citizens and Civil Society", improving service quality is a key motivation for 61% of surveyed public sector agencies to engage with citizens and NGOs (OECD, 2011). Enhanced social service quality resulting from co-production contributes to public value, which incentivizes public organizations to adopt this approach (Kershaw et al., 2017). This perspective shifts the focus to citizens as active participants in value co-creation, not just consumers (Ćwiklicki, 2022).

Another motivation for public organizations to pursue co-production is the desire to improve efficiency and effectiveness (Munoz, 2013; Pestoff, 2012a). The OECD study indicates that improving performance and value for money is a major motivation for 57% of public sector organizations to collaborate with citizens and NGOs (OECD, 2011). Co-production is viewed as a way to harness new resources, making the public sector more cost-effective. It enables better use of resources and inputs, improving the efficiency and effectiveness of social services (Pestoff, 2012a; Meijer, 2016).

Co-production is thus seen as a strategy to enhance the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of social services, addressing complex needs and rising social expectations. By valuing co-production and involving citizens and other stakeholders in all stages of service delivery, human potential is supported, social capital is strengthened, and public value is created (Ćwiklicki, 2019). Implementing co-production in municipalities positively impacts social development, economic growth, and civilizational progress, fundamentally transforming the relationship between the state and its citizens and leading to a structural transformation of the public sector (Meijer, 2016).

According to Dopisać *et al.* (2020) the co-production paradigm, social services work better when they are designed, managed, delivered, and evaluated in collaboration with contextual actors to harness their interest, commitment, energy, knowledge and ambition. It is based on the organisation and functioning of such a context of action, which will have the characteristics of an ecosystem. This is based on collaborative and citizen-centred arrangements and civil society organisations, as well as the competencies of the actors in the process and the institutional structures that ensure sustainable social service delivery.

Nevertheless, in order to fulfill the hopes placed in co-production, we need to pay attention to the concept of sustainability, as McMullin (2023) recently has noted. Sustainable co-production refers to the ongoing, meaningful involvement of service users in the design and delivery of social services, characterised by moving beyond ad hoc activities (Pestoff, 2021; McMullin, 2023) and building regular, long-term relationships between professionals and service users (Bovaird, 2007). The sustainability of social service provision, on the other hand, refers to the ability of the organisations involved to adapt to changing circumstances, such as changes in policy and funding, or changes in the needs and preferences of service users (van Meerkerk, 2018). In other words, to the creation of an ecosystem in which social service provision is actually relevant to the needs reported by social services recipients and takes into account the resources of the participants engaged in the process.

### **3. Enablers of sustainable social service delivery in co-production from a public management perspective**

In contemporary public management theory and practice, the transition towards co-production as the prevailing paradigm for social service delivery has catalyzed extensive research in the early 21st century. This body of research highlights, among other considerations, the imperative to identify enablers of co-production. Therefore, many scholars have addressed this issue. For instance, Bovaird (2007) emphasized the necessity of risk acceptance and trust among parties for co-production. Building on this foundation, Bovaird and Löffler (2012) identified several key drivers of co-production, including motivation, risk-sharing, delegation

and sharing of authority, robust legal and financial foundations, evidence of co-production's societal value, and the competencies of public managers. They noted that citizens are willing to co-produce only in activities they consider important, ensuring their efforts are not squandered by public organizations (Pestoff, 2012b).

Further research indicates that citizens' motivations are also shaped by the perceived ease of participation (Verschuere, Brandsen, Pestoff, 2012; van Eijk, Steen, 2014). According to Needham (2008), successful co-production requires dialogue, interaction, negotiation, and the building of relational capital. Poocharoen and Ting (2015) identified critical elements such as welfare systems, public policies, flexible co-production models, trust, involvement of third sector organizations, and partner incentives are crucial elements. Subsequently, Fledderus and Honingh (2016) expanded on these findings by adding economic motivators, intrinsic rewards, social motivation, values, trust, perceived control, capabilities, resources, and sanctions as key drivers. Verschuere, Vanleen, Steen, and Brandsen (2018) discussed factors that affect the quality of co-production, highlighting equality, inclusion, diversity, real impact, and empowerment of involved parties. They identified three key conditions for effective co-production: professional support, competence of co-producing citizens, and the relevance of the service or task. Finally, Sicilia, Sancino, Nabatchi, and Guarini (2019) focused on factors within the control of public organizations, excluding external factors such as demographics, community characteristics, and social factors. They concentrated on organizational arrangements, professional roles, management tools, participant recruitment and preparation, and process design, categorizing these into organizational and procedural factors.

In the Polish context, only a few authors have addressed this issue so far. As first, Kaźmierczak (2014) pointed out three main conditions for co-production: the public sector's willingness and readiness, the ability to design and manage co-produced services, and the legal and financial frameworks. Public administration staff need knowledge of co-production and its benefits, which can be developed through specific training programs. A significant barrier is the fear among public sector employees of losing control over service delivery. Additionally, existing regulations may need adjustments to accommodate co-production. Kozak and Frączkiewicz-Wronka's (2022) research confirmed the growing importance of the contextual environment for social service provision in co-production (Frączkiewicz-Wronka, 2014; Kozak, 2020). Moreover, Sześciło (2015a) emphasized the legal environment's role, stating that without central authority involvement, co-production will not become a significant model in local communities. The law remains a primary tool for shaping behavior and ensuring accountability in social service delivery (Sześciło, 2015b).

This body of research underscores the complex interplay of factors necessary for sustainable co-production, highlighting the importance of creating supportive environments and frameworks that facilitate meaningful citizen engagement in public service delivery. Especially, synthesis of these positions underscores the importance of organizational and procedural factors in initiating and sustaining co-production in social service provision. Understanding this

process requires comprehensive information on cooperation practices between organizations at the municipal level. Despite the extensive body of research on co-production in public service delivery, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific management practices at the municipal level that facilitate effective cooperation and co-production in Poland. While existing studies have identified key drivers and barriers to co-production, there is limited empirical evidence on how local government units in Poland implement these practices, particularly in the context of their organizational and procedural frameworks.

#### **4. Analysis of own research results**

Following section presents key research findings on co-production in social service provision, demonstrating the management practices implemented in local government units in Poland that facilitate the co-production in social service provision at the municipal level. The objective of this research is to identify and analyze the management practices implemented in local government units in Poland that facilitate the creation and revitalization of co-production in social service provision. This includes examining how these practices align with the factors identified in the literature, such as organizational readiness, professional roles, and the use of management tools.

The selected research results presented below were obtained as a result of conducting field research as part of two projects funded by the University of Economics in Katowice ('Identification of models and determinants of responsiveness in public management' (2021-2023); 'The digital economy - a model approach to support the inclusion of cyber-excluded older people in the use of social services provided in a post-pandemic world by public management entities using ICT' (2022-2023)). The specific research question at this stage of the research and address in this paper was "What are the specific management practices implemented by local government units in Poland that facilitate effective cooperation and co-production in social service provision?".

In relation to this stage, a research question was formulated to identify the management practices implemented in local government units in relation to the way cooperation is built in the creation and revitalisation of the process of social service provision in co-production.

The prepared survey questionnaire was divided into 11 scales, exploring dimensions derived from the literature analysis that are useful in identifying management practices applicable to the process of providing social services implemented in municipalities and metrics. The survey questionnaire consisted of: (a) 152 main questions. When answering them, the respondents could formulate their opinions on some of the questions by marking the answers on a scale of 5 - agree; 4 - rather agree, 3 - neither agree nor disagree, 2 - rather disagree, 1 - disagree and on the next part of the questions on a scale of 5 - never; 4 - sometimes, 3 - regularly, 2 - often,

1 - always. 10 metric questions concerned the characteristics of the respondent (always, depending on the population in a given municipality, the mayor or the chairman of the municipality), i.e. gender, age, education, current position, number of terms in the current position, length of service in years, including in the public sector, instruments of public participation used in the municipality, type of municipality, voivodship in which it operates, turnout in the last local elections.

The reliability of the scales used was checked as a result of the pilot study. The analysis of reliability (internal consistency) using Cronbach's alpha showed that 7 of the 11 scales tested achieved satisfactory reliability of  $\alpha > 0.70$  (Heo et al., 2015; George, Mallery, 2016).

**Table 1.**

*Assessment of the reliability of the scales used*

Scale number	Number of questions	Dimension studied and literature base for preparing questions for the scale	Cronbach's alpha
scale 1	10	Motivation for public service	0.643
scale 2	46	Responsiveness	0.894
scale 3	10	Efficiency of the organisation	0.783
scale 4	5	Job satisfaction	0.91
scale 5	2	Risk of not meeting the needs expressed by citizens	0.559
scale 6	2	Identification of key stakeholders	0.686
scale 7	2	Awareness of the risks to the organisation of not satisfying the stakeholder	0.85
scale 8	7	Ways of building relationships with stakeholders Questions adapted from: G. Abord-Hugon Nonet <sup>1</sup> - T. Gössling - R. Van Tulder <sup>3</sup> - J. M. Bryson Multi-stakeholder Engagement for the Sustainable Development Goals: Introduction to the Special Issue Journal of Business Ethics <a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05192-0">https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05192-0</a> Question numbers: 119;120;121;122;123;124;125	0.761
scale 9	7	Use of stakeholders in the decision-making process Questions prepared from an adaptation by: John M. Bryson, with the assistance of Bill Barberg, Anne Carroll, Colin Eden, Bert George, Jose J. Gonzalez, Jessica Rochester, Laure Vandersmissen, and Bishoy Zaki Complex and Cross-Boundary Challenges In Government: The Value of Strategy Mapping. IBM Center for the Business Of Government Question numbers: 126;127;128;129;130;131;132	0.884
scale 10	5	Clean air	0.61
scale 11	5	Healthy ageing	0.807

Source: own compilation based on George, Mallery, 2016.

A 14-question questionnaire was used to gather respondents' views on the evaluation of local authority practices in initiating and revitalising co-production between organisations providing social services. These related to how relationships with stakeholders were established and how stakeholders were involved in the decision-making process.

The fieldwork was carried out by EU-Consult. LimeSurvey software was used to conduct the survey. The sample was created on the basis of data obtained from the Public Information Bulletin, which contains a list of all local government units in Poland. In order to ensure that the sample was representative and that all types of units were represented, stratified random sampling was used. The distinguishing feature of the local government units was their affiliation

to a NUTS macro-region. The strata were equally distributed to ensure that the macro-regions were comparable. Each stratum had a structure corresponding to the differentiation of institutions according to their type (urban municipality, urban-rural municipality, rural municipality). As of 1 January 2022, the administrative division of Poland consisted of - 2477 local government units at the municipal level, including 302 urban, 677 urban-rural and 1498 rural). In order to draw the units for the survey, an algorithm for drawing numbers without repetition, created in an Excel spreadsheet, was used. The operator of the local government units was submitted to the CATI study and consisted of a total of 1500 records. The data was collected between 6 December 2022 and 21 December 2022. A response rate of about 25% was achieved, which means that about one in four or one in five questionnaire interviews was successful. In the end, 357 local government units were interviewed. The average time taken to complete a questionnaire interview was 57 minutes.

**Table 2.***Description of the surveyed municipal offices*

Element		Frequency	Percentage
Municipality office type	Rural	177	49.6%
	Rural-municipal	104	29.1%
	Municipal	76	21.3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>357</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
Turnout in recent local elections by respondent	Low	136	38.1%
	High	221	61.9%
	Total	357	100.0%

Source: own work.

Given the research objective, at this stage of the study, the questions were directed towards individuals with substantive authority within the municipalities, whose knowledge, experience, and preferences significantly influence the implemented model of social service provision.

**Table 3.***Assessment of management practices*

Characteristics of management practices	Evaluation of the level of acceptance of the statement				
	I disagree	I rather disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	I rather agree	I agree
Cooperation of the authority with partners based on joint setting and implementation of objectives (No. 119)	0,3	1,1	3,4	68,6	26,6
Preparation of reliable information on the results of the authority's activities for partners (No. 120)	1,1	4,2	3,9	60,2	30,5
Authority's use of preferred communication channels to exchange information with partners (No. 121)	0,6	1,7	3,6	63,0	31,1
The authority seeks opportunities for cooperation despite the divergent objectives of the formulated partners (No. 122)	0,0	0,3	3,4	64,7	31,7
The authority uses of social media to activate cooperation (No. 123)	0,8	4,8	10,1	57,4	26,9

Cont. table 3.

Taking care to be ethical and non-manipulative when dealing with partners (No. 124)	0,0	1,1	3,9	64,4	30,5
Use external expertise to build and maintain sustain partnerships (No. 125)	4,5	3,4	3,9	61,9	26,3
Involvement of partners in decision-making on the organisation of activities, i.e. planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of results (No. 126)	3,6	4,2	7,6	60,8	23,8
Analysing with partners the decision-making process and its results (No. 127)	3,1	5,9	4,2	60,5	26,3
Dealing with partner's questioning of actions taken by municipal officials (No. 128)	0,3	1,1	5,3	61,9	31,4
Use of feedback from partners (No. 129)	0,6	1,4	3,6	62,7	31,7
Involvement of managers at different levels and in different structures of the authority's staff in working with partners (No. 130)	1,7	3,1	4,5	62,7	28,0
The importance of participatory decision-making (No. 131)	0,6	3,6	4,8	61,1	30,0
Clear rules, transparency and confidentiality in cooperation (No. 132)	0,0	0,6	3,4	55,7	40,3

Source: own work.

Table 3 above illustrates the assessment of the specific management practices implemented by local government units in Poland that facilitate effective cooperation and co-production in social service provision, made by representatives the local municipalities. A significant majority of respondents agree (26.6%) or rather agree (68.6%) that there is cooperation based on joint setting and implementation of objectives. Then, 30.5% agree and 60.2% rather agree that reliable information on the authority's activities is prepared for partners, indicating a high level of transparency. A combined total of 94.1% (36% rather agree, 63.0% agree) indicates effective use of preferred communication channels to exchange information with partners. In sequence, 31.7% respondents agree and 64.7% rather agree that the authority seeks cooperation opportunities despite divergent objectives, showing a proactive approach to collaboration. While a significant number of respondents agree (26.9%) or rather agree (57.4%) that social media is used to activate cooperation, there is room for improvement. A high agreement level (30.5% agree, 64.4% rather agree) suggests ethical dealings with partners as the management practices implemented by local government units. Next, 26.3% respondents agree and 61.9% rather agree on using external expertise to build and maintain partnerships, indicating a reliance on external resources. A majority agree (23.8%) or rather agree (60.8%) on involving partners in decision-making processes. There is significant agreement among respondents (26.3% agree, 60.5% rather agree) on analyzing decision-making processes with partners. High agreement (31.4% agree, 61.9% rather agree) suggests effective handling of partners' questions. High levels of agreement (31.7% agree, 62.7% rather agree) exists on using feedback from partners indicate a responsive approach. There is also significant agreement among respondents (28.0% agree, 62.7% rather agree) on involving managers at different levels in working with partners. A high level of respondent's agreement (30.0% agree, 61.1% rather

agree) highlights the importance placed on participatory decision-making. Finally, the highest levels of agreement among respondents (40.3% agree, 55.7% rather agree) suggest a strong emphasis on clear rules, transparency, and confidentiality.

When analysing the obtained results of the research, we notice that a significant majority of the respondents assessed the way of building cooperation implemented in their municipal offices, in terms of creating and revitalising the process of providing social services in co-production, as characteristic of co-production. This is confirmed by the values calculated for the answers obtained.

The results indicate that local government units in Poland are generally proactive in establishing and maintaining cooperative relationships with their partners. There is a strong emphasis on transparency, communication, and ethical behavior, which are crucial for effective co-production. The involvement of external expertise and participatory decision-making processes further supports the collaborative environment necessary for co-production.

These findings align with the organizational and procedural factors identified in the literature, such as the need for professional support, clear communication channels, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process. However, there is still room for improvement in areas such as the use of social media for activation of cooperation and ensuring that regulations and frameworks are fully supportive of co-production efforts.

Overall, the research underscores the importance of specific management practices in facilitating co-production and highlights the need for continued focus on enhancing these practices to achieve sustainable and effective co-production in social service provision.

## Discussion

Regarding the answers dealing with organisational factors, it is possible to indicate the management practices implemented by local government units in Poland that facilitate effective cooperation and co-production in social service provision and follow the findings of our research in the co-production literature. The public managers carry out the following activities, and the importance them is also emphasized in the literature:

1. **Cooperation with partners based on joint setting and implementation of objectives.**

This managerial practice aligns with Sicilia et al. (2019), whom emphasize the importance of organizational arrangements and the roles of public managers in fostering cooperation. Additionally, the work by Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) highlights that co-production often requires clear roles and active collaboration between public managers and citizens to set and achieve shared goals.

2. **Preparation of reliable information on the authority's activities for partners** reflects the critical role of transparency in building trust and accountability. Osborne et al. (2016) emphasize that transparency is a key factor in ensuring effective co-production, as it fosters trust and mutual respect among all stakeholders involved.
3. **Use of preferred communication channels.** The effective use of preferred communication channels to exchange information with partners, underscores the importance of communication tools in co-production. This is supported by Brown and Osborne (2013), who discuss how procedural factors like effective communication channels are essential for facilitating cooperation and ensuring all stakeholders are well-informed and engaged.
4. **Seeking cooperation opportunities.** The proactive approach to seeking cooperation opportunities, even when objectives diverge, aligns with the literature that highlights the need for strategic management tools and strategies to foster collaboration. For instance, Brandsen and Honingh (2016) discuss the importance of managerial strategies in navigating and aligning diverse objectives to create a cohesive cooperative environment.
5. **Use of social media.** Though our findings indicate significant use of social media to activate cooperation, there is room for improvement. The evolving role of digital tools in organizational communication is highlighted by Meijer (2014) or Paskaleva et al. (2017), who emphasize the need for strategic use of social media to enhance engagement and interaction with stakeholders.
6. **Ethical and non-manipulative dealings.** The high agreement on ethical dealings with partners supports the notion of building relational capital, which is fundamental in co-production. Needham (2008) points out that ethical interactions and non-manipulative practices are essential for maintaining trust and fostering long-term cooperative relationships.
7. **Use of external expertise.** The reliance on external expertise to build and maintain partnerships is highlighted in your findings and supported by the literature. The work of Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) indicates that involving external experts can bring in new perspectives and skills necessary for effective co-production.
8. **Partner involvement in decision-making.** The importance of involving partners in decision-making processes is emphasized by our findings and supported by Brandsen et al. (2018), who argue that participatory governance and involving stakeholders in decision-making are crucial for successful co-production.
9. **Analyzing decision-making with partners** reflects the need for collaborative and inclusive decision-making practices. This is supported by the work of Bussu and Galanti (2018), who highlight the role of leadership in facilitating co-production and ensuring that decision-making is a shared process.

10. **Dealing with partner's questions.** Effective handling of partners' questions indicates a responsive and transparent approach, as found in your research. This aligns with the findings of Brown et al. (2016), who emphasize the importance of responsiveness and transparency in building strong cooperative relationships.
11. **Use of feedback partners** indicate a responsive approach essential for continuous improvement. Osborne et al. (2016) discuss the critical role of feedback in adapting and refining co-production processes to better meet stakeholders' needs.
12. **Involvement of managers** at different levels in working with partners highlights the role of leadership in fostering a collaborative environment. Sicilia et al. (2019) and Bussu and Galanti (2018) both emphasize the importance of leadership in facilitating co-production initiatives and ensuring active engagement of all stakeholders.
13. **Participatory decision-making.** This finding underscores its critical role in co-production. Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) argue that participatory decision-making processes are fundamental to effective co-production, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered (PHRP).
14. **Clear rules and transparency.** The strong emphasis on clear rules, transparency, and confidentiality, as indicated by the highest levels of agreement in our findings, is foundational for effective and sustainable co-production. Osborne et al. (2016) also highlight that clear rules and transparency are essential for building trust and ensuring accountability in co-production processes.

## Conclusions/Summary

One of the key challenges facing the modern welfare state is how to provide social services that effectively and efficiently meet the needs of citizens. In postmodern societies, where the relationship between the state and citizens is constantly evolving, new forms of service provision are emerging. These new forms challenge traditional patterns of production (Pestoff, 2012a). As a result, the evolution of public governance models is accompanied by changes in social service provision and perceptions of citizens' roles in this process.

Therefore, nowadays the involvement of citizens and organizations from different sectors working in the community is an important aspect of social service delivery. A natural area of expansion for these arrangements and co-production is the local community. The sine qua non condition for the emergence of the process of co-production of social services in the local environment is the full realisation of the principle of subsidiarity, which allows for the building of a civil society that consciously participates in the process of providing social services and solving difficult problems of significant importance to the local community. The role of the state here is to establish the forms and legal basis for cooperation, but also to disseminate

knowledge about the possibilities and results of state interaction with external actors (Gronkiewicz and Ziółkowski, 2014). Adequate legal conditions and the practical dimension of their implementation are necessary conditions for the stimulation and realisation of civic activity in the public space. Since local governments are the entities directly obligated to provide social services, they need to translate the theoretical foundations of sustainable social service provision into practice. Therefore, the question arises, what management practices implemented by local government units can facilitate effective cooperation and co-production in social service provision? This study addresses this issue.

The research underscores the complexity of co-production in public and social services, highlighting the need for supportive organizational and procedural frameworks. The findings suggest that Polish municipalities are actively engaging in cooperative practices that align with the theoretical underpinnings of co-production, emphasizing transparency, ethical practices, and proactive collaboration. However, there is room for improvement in areas such as the strategic use of digital tools. The insights gained from this research can inform future efforts to enhance co-production practices, ensuring more effective and inclusive public service delivery.

## **Research Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, the reliance on self-reported data from local government units may introduce bias, as respondents may portray their practices more favorably. Secondly, the sample was limited to Poland, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different political, social, and economic environments.

Future research should consider expanding the scope to include multiple countries, allowing for a comparative analysis of co-production practices in diverse settings. Additionally, longitudinal studies would be valuable to assess the long-term impacts of co-production on social service quality and citizen satisfaction. Further exploration of the role of digital technologies in facilitating co-production, especially in the post-pandemic context, could provide insights into how ICT can enhance citizen engagement and service delivery efficiency.

In conclusion, while the study provides valuable insights into the evolving role of co-production in social service provision, addressing these limitations and pursuing future research directions will deepen our understanding of this complex and dynamic field.

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