

ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

How communities can meet increased needs despite shrinking budgets



Co-Production: What is it? And how to do it.

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Co-production is a broad concept that includes many different activities that can be utilized at any point in the public service system and requires both public administration employees and non-public administration volunteers to work collaboratively to create public benefit (Nabatchi et al., 2017).

Research of a single community food pantry in the midwestern United States, consisting of interviews, observation, and a review of documents, obtained data about why and how one community used co-production to address rising food insecurity rates in their community.

The research revealed six factors the community considered when deciding to co-produce and six factors that served as challenges to implementation. It also discovered three factors the community should have considered, uncovered ways the co-produced food pantry overcame challenges, and identified ways co-production benefited the community food pantry and the community-at-large.

INSIDE

**INTRODUCTION,
BACKGROUND &
PROBLEM STATEMENT**

**THEORETICAL
FOUNDATION**

**PRIOR RESEARCH &
MUNICIPAL CASE STUDY**

**FINDINGS &
CONCLUSIONS**



Introduction

During economic downturns, municipal decision-makers often must make difficult budget decisions to reduce costs (Nabatchi et al., 2017). However, residents' household budgets also become strained, as evidenced by the global financial crisis, demand for services increases, and new needs emerge (Henriksen et al., 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2017). During the last recession, Midwest municipalities saw property values plummet, mortgage foreclosures skyrocket, property tax foreclosures hit crisis levels, and unemployment rates reach higher than national averages (Hoogterp, 2011; Kurth et al., 2017; Rooney, 2008; Walsh, 2018). As a result, municipalities saw their tax revenue decline drastically, the demand for services increase, and new needs emerge among their residents (Harris, 2009; Hoogterp, 2011; Kurth et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 global pandemic has the potential to create another recession and wreak even greater havoc on the economy, putting more significant financial pressure on municipalities and families. Local units of government that can innovate and seek non-traditional ways to maintain services and even increase services to meet emerging needs, especially during economic downturns, can help stabilize their community and prevent further economic decline (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Or & Aranda-Jan, 2017; Runya et al., 2015).



Background

According to the International City County Managers Association (ICMA), 46.2% of municipal master plans address food topics, and 21.6% of local governments either directly provide emergency food to those in need or are a partner in a program that does (ICMA, 2015). In addition, food assistance programs are increasingly used to address long-term food insecurity problems, rather than emergency or short-term food shortages, despite the prevalent use of federal food assistance programs (Berner & O'Brien, 2004; Berner et al., 2008; Daponte & Bade, 2006; Edwards, 2012; Ratcliff et al., 2011). However, non-profit and religious-based organizations struggle to meet this long-term demand (Dubb, 2018; Edwards, 2012; Paynter et al., 2011).

Local governments must innovate and form unique collaborations to provide support services to their residents most in need, especially during economic downturns (Hilvert & Swindell, 2013; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Or & Aranda-Jan, 2017; Runya et al., 2015). Public governance has become increasingly networked, and administrators must adopt a service-dominant theory that is more relevant and addresses the inter-organizational aspect of the current public administration field (Osborne et al., 2012).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Little research exists about local units of government using co-production to address complex community problems. In addition, nothing has been documented in the literature about how co-production collaborations between government and NGOs are determined, structured, governed, or operated. Given the continuing need for public administrators to find ways to address emerging

community issues with little funding, it follows that a co-production collaboration to address food insecurity in a local unit of government warranted study.

How can municipalities design a co-production collaboration to meet increased needs in the community while faced with a shrinking budget?



Theoretical Foundation

Public administration management has seen rapid changes in the past 40 years. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, government management's hierarchical public administration form prevailed, coined New Public Administration (Osborne et al., 2012). However, **New Public Management (NPM)** theories argued that New Public Administration methods were inefficient and failed to serve citizens' interests (Hood, 1991). These theorists argued for a more businesslike government approach, bringing concepts from market economy into government management (Dunsire, 1995, Gruening, 2001). However, this created a fragmented system; more organizations had to work together to provide public services creating more networks, not less (Bevir & Rhodes, 2011). The need to work within these numerous networks has led to what Osborne (2010) called **New Public Governance (NPG)**, in which collaboration and non-hierarchical management between organizations is imperative.

Resource dependence theory (RDT) explains how organizations manage external interdependencies and reduce uncertainty (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Municipal governments are dependent on property tax revenues. When property values plummet, municipal budgets shrink. Often, NPM-oriented government officials argue that merging services is how best to manage this interdependence on property values (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). However, RDT identifies five options available; one of these is joint ventures (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). However, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in joint ventures with governmental entities often perceive a loss of autonomy; the public entity must ensure the NGO is publicly accountable for the public funds/support it receives and the controls put in place to ensure accountability negatively impact, to some degree, an NGOs autonomy and flexibility to respond to social needs (Anheier et al., 1997; Gazley, 2010; Gjems-Onstad, 1990; Gronbjerg, 1991, 1993; Jung & Moon, 2007; Lipskey & Smith, 1990; Never, 2011).

Co-production collaborations could be the joint ventures RDT describes, striking the right balance of accountability and autonomy for both the governmental entity and NGOs. Using NPG foundations to build co-production collaborations to provide services might enhance local government's capacity to meet citizens' emerging social needs, especially during economic downturns.

50 years ago, Ostrom and Ostrom (1971) developed **co-production theory** to incorporate citizens' involvement in service planning and delivery. Ostrom (as cited in Osborne et al., 2012) argued that public service organizations depended on the community for delivering services as much as the community depended on receiving the services. The assumption is that everyday citizens, together with professionals, share responsibility for delivering services to communities (Sharp, 1980 as cited in Bovaird, 2007). In other words, average citizens are a necessary part of collaborations to produce services; citizens as resources (Brix et al., 2020).

Economic downturns negatively impact the local government and NGO sectors of society as well as individuals. Local governments, faced with plummeting tax revenue due to declining property values while simultaneously feeling the pressure of increased poverty among its residents, are forced to make impossible decisions about critical services with shrinking budgets (Harris, 2009; Hoogterp, 2011; Kurth et al., 2017).

Funding is always critical for NGOs, but during times of economic downturns, NGOs must do more with less (Charles & Kim, 2016). Human services NGOs provide critical resources to impoverished people in the community. During the Great Recession, NGOs provided services to more people as the economy experienced the most severe economic crisis since the Great Depression (Dubb, 2018). Unemployment rates and foreclosures skyrocketed, charitable giving plummeted, and local governments began to feel the effects in their communities.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (USDA, 2020a). During the Great Recession height, 14.9% of all U.S. households were food insecure in 2011 (USDA, 2020b). In 2019, the food insecurity rate was down to 10.1% of U.S. households, below pre-recession rates (USDA, 2020b). However, the COVID-19 global pandemic has created the possibility for as many as 54 million people, or 15.24% of Americans, to become food insecure in 2020 (Feeding America, 2020); a higher percentage than was seen during the peak point of food insecurity during the Great Recession.

Food insecurity can lead to several problems, especially for children. Children who are food insecure are more likely to struggle to succeed in school (Alaimo et al., 2001) and experience physical and mental health problems (Alaimo et al. 2001; Gunderson et al., 2011; Hampton, 2007). Depression (Whitaker et al., 2006) and stress (Hamelin et al., 1999) are other potential problems associated with food insecurity for both children and adults. Food insecurity increases the risk for obesity and poor nutrition (Bruening et al., 2012; Gany et al., 2013) while increasing health care costs (Tarasuk et al., 2015). Finally, a community’s quality of life diminishes as families’ ability to meet their food needs declines (Mammen et al., 2009). Addressing food insecurity at the local level can improve health outcomes, increase social equity, and improve communities’ economic development (ICMA, 2020; Jakobsen & Anderson, 2013).

Current governance designs have failed to successfully address food insecurity, and alternative governance structures should replace them (Candel, 2014). Likewise, Pereira and Ruysenaar (2012) argued for more adaptive forms of governance, including the government as just one cog in the wheel of a collaborative network, to successfully address complex problems like food insecurity. Fratantuono and Sarcone (2017) argued that cross-sector collaborations improve community health outcomes. Addressing food insecurity in communities requires multi-sector collaboration.



Prior Research

In 2006, the ICMA released a guide for local governments to help their residents improve health outcomes by supporting programs and implementing policies supporting healthy lifestyles (ICMA, 2006). The guide indicated that local governments could use their ideal position to improve access to healthy food options in their communities. According to the ICMA, in 2015, 46.2% of municipal master plans address food topics, and 21.6% of local governments either directly provide emergency food to those in need or are partners in a program that does (ICMA, 2015). As for citizen participation, local governments more often engage with citizen groups rather than individual citizens or the community as a whole (ICMA, 2019).

In 2012, the ICMA found that local governments' primary reasons for considering PPPs were cost savings (88.2%) and external fiscal constraints (49.6%) (ICMA, 2012). And in 2017, 83.1% of local governments still considered PPPs for cost savings and 48.8% reported external fiscal constraints continued to influence PPP consideration (ICMA, 2017). However, recently, 20.1% of local governments report facing barriers to PPPs, with employees and elected officials being the most common source of barriers (ICMA, 2019). The ICMA issued a special report in 2012 about why public administrators chose collaboration for service delivery. According to O'Leary (2014), the ICMA 2012 special report indicates that 86% reported it was "the right thing to do," 84% saw it as a way to solve complex problems, and 81% reported a need for better outcomes. Also, 77% of public managers reported using collaboration to build relationships and form alliances that will benefit their agency, while 69% reported collaboration improves the problem-solving process (O'Leary, 2014). Only 32% of respondents indicated they engage in collaboration because it is explicitly mandated (O'Leary, 2014).

While the ICMA 2012 special report clearly shows the preference for collaboration over PPPs, what happens in practice, according to the ICMA's 2017 report, is entirely different. 14.3% of local governments discontinued PPPs and returned to providing the services directly; the most common reason was displeasure with the quality or cost of the services delivered (ICMA, 2019). It is unfortunate that although public administrators regarded collaboration highly just five years prior, public administrators turned instead to in-house service provision rather than seeking ways other than PPPs to collaborate. This fact is especially concerning considering research demonstrates how organizations can benefit from collaboration efforts.

A gap in the research exists. Researchers have studied NGOs' use of co-production in services related to food insecurity, health, autism, mental health, and recreation services (Batalden et al., 2016; Cheng, 2019; Hardy et al., 2019; Kong et al., 2020; May, 2014; Oliver et al., 2019). A number of researchers studied governmental organizations and their use of co-production; however most of this research focuses on frameworks, benefits, and outcomes of co-production (Brix et al., 2020; Clarke & MacDonald, 2016; Jaspers & Steen, 2019; Linders, 2012; Osborne et al., 2015; Wukich, 2021). Others investigated reasons why co-production fails (Kleinhans, 2017; Torfing et al., 2019). Still others investigated factors that led to successful efforts (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Ngo et al., 2016; Webster & Leleux, 2018). Yet, scholars have not investigated what factors a government entity considers when entering co-production collaborations or how they are governed, structured, and operated.



Municipal Case Study

The research took a post-positivist position and utilized case study methodology to allow for in-depth study using triangulated data analysis to produce an accurate description of the bounded system of a co-produced community pantry (Yin, 2017). Purposive heterogeneous sampling identified participants with the knowledge and understanding to provide the needed information about the co-production initiative (Yin, 2014). Data was collected through interviews using open-ended questions, reviewing existing documents, and observing operations.



Findings

6 factors considered when developing the co-produced community food pantry:

- Extent of need in the community & the needs of the organizations
- Previous experience of the entities in providing similar services
- Mutual interest in, and mutual benefit from, providing the service
- Amount of cross-sector community support for the project
- Logistical issues (i.e. staffing, volunteer capacity, space)
- Financial needs of the project

Factors that were not considered, but should have been:

- Organizational differences
- Potential growth of the project
- The need to remain flexible to address unknown challenges that arise

6 factors that posed challenges to success:

- Logistics (i.e., physically re-locating operations, appropriate space)
- Ideological differences between the entities
- Volunteer/staff capacity to properly operate services
- Revenue and financial management
- Trust
- Municipal administrative turnover

3 aspects of the structure of the co-produced community food pantry

- Shared power organizational structure
- Daily operations consisting of a client choice model, administrative duties, and direct client services
- Community partners

UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

- Establishing & clearly communicating expectations at the beginning support a smooth transition
- Communication, education, & training are vital to overcoming ideological differences
- Providing information and data and having informal conversations can help overcome political opposition
- Co-producing increased financial resources from non-governmental sources
- Co-producing improved the services to clients
- Co-producing allowed expanded services to continue without interruption during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Highlighted government's ability to impact the common community good without negatively impacting the budget.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed the co-produced community food pantry addressed growing food insecurity amidst the Great Recession's lingering effects.


It followed local government trends toward collaboration and operated by sharing power, reducing resource dependence, and securing additional financial support by co-producing with clients, businesses, elected officials, and residents.

The co-produced pantry was also a source of continuity in the face of a public health crisis and a reflection of government furthering the common good through co-production.

Obstacles were overcome through trust-building, communication, education and training.

How to do it

Local governments can tackle complex problems in their communities through co-production

- 
- Fully understand the extent of the community problem
 - Identify organizations already working on the identified problem or interested in working on it
 - Assess the experience each organization has in addressing the identified problem
 - Assess the amount of cross-sector support in the community & identify potential partners
 - Understand resources each entity can bring to the collaboration & resources each entity is lacking
 - Identify challenges to collaborating including ideological, logistical, financial, capacity, and political
 - Establish trust and commit to open and transparent interactions, revisiting trust regularly
 - Determine financial needs of the project
 - Identify other external financial support through grant opportunities, sponsorships, or endowments
 - Establish partnerships in the community with civic organizations, businesses, media, volunteer groups and citizens who can help raise funds, donate supplies, or provide volunteer support
 - Consider potential growth of the project and plan for expansion from the beginning
 - Develop a shared power organizational chart and operations outline delineating financial management responsibilities, lines of communication, and operational duties (including job descriptions)
 - Develop agreements and a governing body resolution, as needed
 - Conduct constant communication with all parties to resolve conflict and address unforeseen challenges
 - Reestablish connections, partnerships, and trust quickly when personnel turnover occurs



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