

## Chapter 3

# Cocreation Is the Answer

### Abstract

This chapter looks at how Goal 17 on partnerships can be a lever of change. It discusses the partnership approach to achieving the SDGs and unravels the key functions of networks and partnerships, such as knowledge sharing, coordination, and collaborative governance. It carefully explains why we need to shift the focus of the global debate from collaborative governance to the cocreation of public value outcomes. It then provides a schematic account of the different steps in the process of cocreating outcomes, which include initiation, design, implementation, and evaluation. Finally, the chapter identifies the key merits of cocreation and looks its dark side straight in the eye.

*Keywords:* Partnerships; networks; collaborative governance; cocreation; public value; lever of change

### A Collaborative Partnership Approach for Reaching the SDGs

The UN SDGs not only set an important global agenda but also provide the means of implementation for how to deal with the urgent problems and challenges that have prompted the formulation of the SDGs. The means of implementation are found in Goal 17, which recommends a partnership approach to designing and implementing solutions that will help achieving all the other SDGs. Hence, the opening statement in Goal 17 “Partnership for the goals” says:

A successful sustainable development agenda requires partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society. These inclusive partnerships, built upon principles and values, a shared vision, and shared goals that place people and the planet at the center, are needed at the global, regional, national, and local level.

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Co-Creation for Sustainability, 23–40



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As such, Goal 17 calls for the formation of multi-stakeholder partnerships that are crucial for connecting the SDGs, mobilizing resources and enhancing effectiveness and impact. Multi-stakeholder partnerships should be formed at all levels of governance from the global to the local. At the global level, the North and South must partner up to ensure redistribution of wealth, technology, and trading benefits; at the cross-national regional level, countries must exchange knowledge, experiences, and best practices; at the national level, public and private actors must align their efforts to build capacities for achieving the SDGs; and finally, at the local level, all relevant and affected actors must joint forces in creating projects, initiatives, and campaigns that accelerate goal attainment. Goals 17 directly appeals to people in both developed and developing countries to join or create a group in their local community that seeks to mobilize action on the implementation of the SDGs. People should also encourage their (local) governments to partner with businesses, civil society organizations, academia, etc., for the implementation of the SDGs. An *SDG Partnerships Platform* has been created to inform, inspire, and educate people and spur networking and partnering across organizations, sectors, and levels. It provides empirical accounts of more than 5,000 partnerships, operating at different levels and with different constellations of actors.

When looking closer at the 19 targets of Goal 17, the partnership approach becomes a little blurred. Hence, some of the targets are mainly concerned with North-South transfers of financial capital, technology, and knowledge, while others aim to create a universal, rules-based, open, nondiscriminatory, and equitable multilateral trading system or to enhance political and institutional capacity-building at the national level in order to ensure a well-financed, effective, and coordinated effort to increase sustainability and monitor progress. However, target 17.16 and 17.17 clearly recommend a partnership approach to implementing the SDGs:

- 17.16* Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries.
- 17.17* Encourage and promote effective public, public-private, and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships.

These targets leave no doubt as to the importance and impact of partnerships for implementing the SDGs: partnerships support the achievement of the SDGs by mobilizing and sharing knowledge, expertise, ideas, and resources, and their formation should be encouraged and promoted based on prior experiences with partnerships, networks, and other forms of collaborative governance. A knowledge-based promotion of multi-stakeholder partnerships is the key ambition of this book.

Research provides strong support for a network and partnership approach to solving complex problems (Ansell & Torfing, 2014; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2015; Roberts, 2000; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). Knowledge, resources, and capacities are often unevenly distributed across actors, sectors, and levels and need to be pulled together to spur creative problem-solving and implement common goals.

## Partnerships, Networks and Their Key Functions

In this book, we define *partnerships* as an agreement between two or more public and/or private actors who voluntarily chose to collaborate in order to achieve a common goal by creating some kind of synergy whereby the actors make use of each other's talents. Partnerships are sometimes associated with collaborative arrangements based on a formal contract that regulates how the partners share or reallocate risks, costs, benefits, resources, and responsibilities (Koppenjan, 2005). In line with the notion of multi-stakeholder partnerships in Goal 17, we shall here talk about partnerships in a looser and less formal sense of actors partnering up in order to exchange or pool resources in the effort to achieve jointly defined goals in response to problems, challenges, or emerging opportunities.

This understanding of partnerships brings us close to the increasingly fashionable concept of *governance networks* defined as horizontal relationships between interdependent actors who negotiate and deliberate within a relatively self-organized institutional arena in order to produce effective governance solutions (Ansell & Torfing, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007). What the network concept brings to the table is: *first*, that the relationship between network actors is horizontal in the sense that no actor can solve a dispute in the network through the exercise of formal authority based on a higher hierarchical position; *second*, that social actors join forces because they are mutually dependent on each other's resources and competences; and, *third*, that interaction takes place in self-regulated arenas consisting of norms, rules, and values that are shaped and reshaped by the participants. Nevertheless, both the concept of partnerships and networks are based on the same basic assumption that actors come together because they realize that they can do things together than they could not do at all or as well on their own. As such, we shall use the two notions interchangeably.

The last point begs the question of what it is the actors in a network or partnership are doing together to achieve a common goal. We propose that public and/or private actors who join forces in a network or partnerships have different and over time rising aspirations for their joint interaction. As illustrated by Fig. 3.1 below, networks and partnerships may perform three key functions that the participating actors may add on top of each other in a progressive and cumulative way.

At first, when public and/or private actors get together and form a network or partnership, they are eager to learn more about the problem or challenge at hand. They want to know more about past solutions and their limitations, what is presently happening, and what the other actors are thinking and doing. Hence,

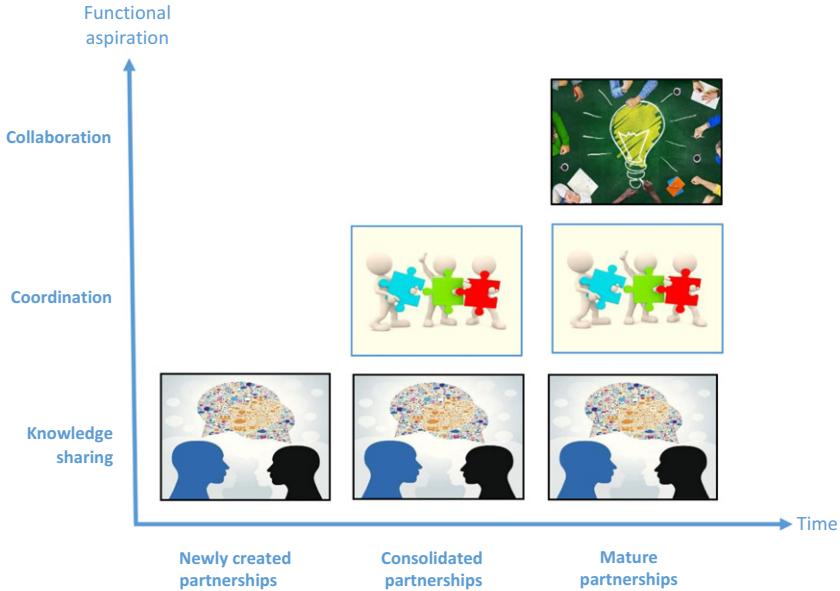


Fig. 3.1. Rising Functional Aspiration of Networks and Partnerships.

newly created networks and partnerships aspire to engage in knowledge sharing so that everybody has the same basic knowledge about the problem and access to the same basic information about past and present problem-solving strategies and the drivers and barriers pertaining to these strategies. Knowledge sharing is very important as the lack of knowledge, outdated insights, misinformation, prejudice, and ignorance tend to hamper problem-solving. Conversely, a freely flowing exchange of knowledge and information between interested parties will tend to stimulate learning and build momentum for action as people begin to see the urgency of well-known problems and the opportunities for acting upon them.

When the actors have acquired a contextual understanding of the problem, gotten to know each other, and developed a certain level of trust, they might raise their expectations and aspire to coordinate their actions, projects, and initiatives in order to avoid conflicts and clashes (negative coordination) and create synergy by exploiting complementarities and creating mutually reinforcing effects (positive coordination). Many of the actors who are brought together in networks and partnerships will already be engaged in relevant projects and activities and coordination of these will often be a major achievement. Uncoordinated actions may not amount to much, but with the right timing and sequencing and mutual support between related actions, two plus two may suddenly equal 5. Hence, consolidated networks and partnerships contribute to effective governance and

accelerated goal achievement by engaging in ongoing coordination. Since there is no hierarchical authority capable of coordinating activities top-down through imposition, and collaboration has replaced market-based competition, coordination in networks and partnerships will tend to emerge in a bottom-up fashion and will rely on negotiation and deliberation among a plethora of actors. Recent research refers to this type of coordination as “pluricentric coordination” (Pedersen, Sehested, & Sørensen, 2011; Sørensen, 2014).

Mature networks and partnerships, which are already sharing knowledge and coordinating ongoing activities in a trustworthy manner, may aspire to engage in collaborative problem-solving that involves defining the problem at hand, designing and implementing new and bold solutions, and measuring their impact. This is a crucial step since solving complex societal problems clearly requires more than continuous knowledge sharing and pluricentric coordination. Breaking deadlocks and accelerating change oblige public and/or private actors to jointly explore the problem at hand, agree on a relatively precise diagnosis, canvas local options, formulate a plausible action theory that links particular actions to results and outcomes, develop and test prototypes, and mobilize resources for implementation, upscaling, and diffusion.

## **Collaborative Governance**

Collaborative governance in networks and partnerships provides an attractive alternative to top-down government and market-based competition. It rallies social and political actors around a particular problem or challenge, aligns their goals and ambitions, and makes use of their different experiences, competences, ideas, and resources when exploring possibilities for designing and implementing joint solutions to common problems. For many years, collaborative governance in networks and partnerships was considered the last option and was only tried when hierarchical government and market competition had been tried and found wanting. More recently, however, collaborative governance in networks and partnerships has gained prominence and is increasingly considered as a potent lever of change. Collaborative governance tends to involve knowledgeable and resourceful actors from outside the public sector. It facilitates the exchange of manifold resources and builds a joint ownership over common solutions and thus avoid the conflicts and rivalry that follows from cut-throat competition in the market place.

The new interest in collaboration as a tool for governing modern societies has stimulated scholarly debates about the nature of collaboration (Gray, 1989; Straus, 2002). Collaboration can be defined as an interactive process through which actors with different roles, interests, and perspectives work together to transform raw materials such as lived experiences, scientific knowledge, facts and norms, institutionalized practices, and material structures into new designs that solve a particular problem or tackle an emerging challenge.

For many years collaboration was associated with protracted deliberations based on the force of the better argument that would eventually foster a

unanimous consent where everybody agrees about everything. Recently, however, there has been a growing recognition that seeking to obtain a total consensus in multi-actor settings is not only time-consuming but also carries the risk that the obtained consensus is either premised on external or internal exclusions (Young, 2000) or based on the least common denominator that seldom provides an innovative solution to the problem at hand (Torfing, 2019).

In response to these problems, it makes sense to further qualify the definition and understanding of collaboration by making two important assertions. First, collaboration involves a combination of reason, passion, and rhetoric. Rational argumentation alone will not lead to consensus in multi-actor settings as the actors will tend to disagree on the normative and factual premises for the discussion and often face trade-offs, dilemmas, and paradoxes that cannot be resolved on rational grounds.

Second, collaboration merely fosters a rough consensus that is partial in the sense that the actors involved in deliberative interaction foster an agreement that on pragmatic grounds is accepted as a “good enough” solution that will be further advanced despite dissent. Such a rough consensus is often created in a well-attended meeting where the person chairing the meeting summarizes the content of an agreement and asks if it is acceptable to everybody, where after the majority nod and those who disagree keep silent.

While this way of making decisions in collaborative arenas falls short of providing an all-embracing consensus, it allows collaborating actors to move forward to test agreed upon solutions in practice. Based on these arguments, we shall define collaboration as the constructive management of difference in order to find common solutions to joint problems (Gray, 1989). Collaboration is premised on the presence of notable differences between the experiences, views, and ideas of the participating actors and should not seek to eliminate these differences, but instead find ways of constructively managing them to foster agreement about good enough solutions that enjoy widespread if not total support.

Collaboration is particularly useful in turbulent times where disruptive problems and events wax and wane in uncertain and unpredictable ways, and social and political actors want to share the risks associated with dealing with hard-to-solve problems and reap the fruits of a pragmatic cross-fertilization of ideas. This is why collaborative governance in networks and partnerships is called for in the current situation where the social and natural environment is threatened by social inequality, discrimination, violent conflicts, and negative externalities of economic growth.

## **From Collaborative Governance to Cocreation**

While collaborative governance provides an ideal strategy for dealing with complex and turbulent problems and offers a good alternative to hierarchy and markets, there is much to gain from pushing the global debate on collaborative governance a little further and embracing the new concept of cocreation. Indeed, this book aims to demonstrate the potential impact of cocreation on achieving the

SDGs. As such, cocreation may provide the accelerator we need to cross the finish line in time while simultaneously strengthening public governance, democracy, and the resilience of local communities.

While being closely affiliated, the basic ideas of collaborative governance and cocreation are slightly different in at least three important respects (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). First, while collaborative governance is often initiated and facilitated by public agencies seeking to expand their reach beyond what public authorities can normally influence, cocreation is often co-initiated by public and private actors and based on distributed action, meaning that all the participating actors can contribute and seek to advance joint outcomes. Co-creation is also characterized by a distributed leadership that implies that several, if not all, of the participating actors partake in carrying out important leadership functions (Bolden, 2011). Hence, cocreation is less state-centric and thus can also be used in countries with weak state institutions.

Second, while collaborative governance tends to involve organized stakeholders, including professional and well-organized civil society organizations, in targeted problem-solving within a particular policy domain, cocreation tends to involve a broader range of actors, including lay-actors such as individual citizens, user groups, neighborhoods, community leaders, etc., in order to mobilize the resources needed for spurring transformative change across boundaries. As such, cocreation is more people-centric than organization-centric since you do not have to be a private company, a trade union, or a large donor organization in order to have a seat at the table. Affected groups such as youth, women, indigenous people, refugees, and people living in extreme poverty are invited to join the collective efforts to solve global problems through local action.

Finally, while collaborative governance aims to enhance the capacity for societal problem-solving by aligning relevant actors and facilitating mutual learning, cocreation involves a proactive search for new and emerging solutions to present and future problems. In short, cocreation aims to involve relevant and affected actors in the creation of innovative outcomes.

In sum, cocreation is less state-centric and more inclusive when it comes to participation and more focused on collaborative innovation. As indicated in [Fig. 3.2](#), the three defining qualities of cocreation are important for the production of public value. Inclusive participation ensures that the needs of lay-actors are reflected in agendas for change. Distributed action and leadership balance the interests and power of public and private actors. Finally, collaborative innovation helps to break policy deadlocks while securing broad-based support for innovative solutions.

Based on this brief conceptual clarification, we can envision cocreation as an inclusive and distributed process of multi-actor collaboration that aims to find new ways of solving pressing problems. A more elaborate and demanding definition defines cocreation as:

A distributed and collaborative process of creative problem-solving that proactively mobilizes public and private resources, including those of lay-actors, to jointly define problems and design and implement solutions that are emergent and seek to generate public value.

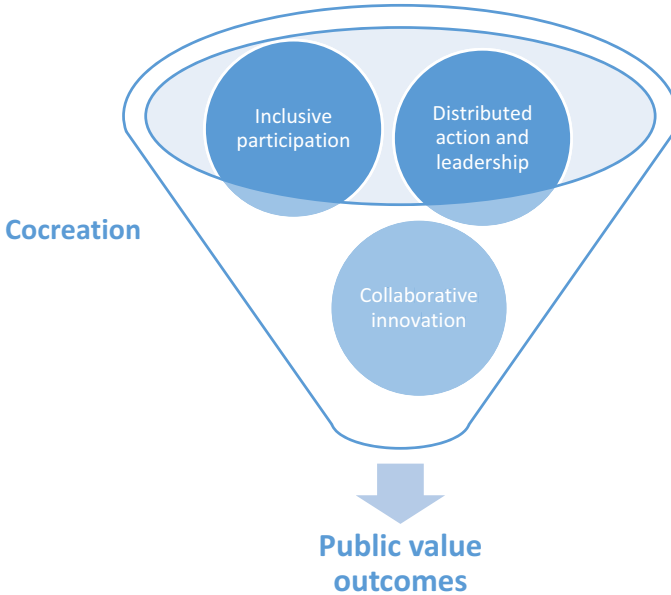


Fig. 3.2. Cocreating Public Value Outcomes.

In practical terms, this fine-grained definition of cocreation means that we should aim to advance collaborative processes characterized by:

- A relative even distribution of the ability to initiate action and the responsibility for carrying out leadership tasks (a distributed process)
- Persistent efforts to connect actors from different organizations, sectors, levels, jurisdiction, locations, etc., who share a common ambition to solve a particular problem or challenge (proactive resource mobilization)
- Willingness and courage to think out of the box and pursue emerging solutions that disrupt common wisdom and established practices (creative problem-solving through emergent solutions)
- Early involvement of actors who not only get to contribute to the implementation of new and bold SDG solutions but also get to influence the problem definition and the solution design (wide-ranging influence)
- Solutions that not only benefit the participating actors but are valued by society at large (public value production)

In the messy and imperfect empirical reality, these defining features of cocreation are seldom all present at once. However, to illustrate the main idea, let us take a look at a typical example of local cocreation. Inspired by programs and



campaigns launched by the government, the Youth Foundation of Bangladesh (YFB) has initiated an awareness and participatory action program to reduce the catastrophic impact that Single Use Plastic from local water transport systems has on rivers and local marine life. The Youth Foundation of Bangladesh has raised 375,000 USD for the program and also secured in-kind contributions from national and multinational organizations. It works closely with the local municipality, the City Corporation, water transport lease-holders, and business organizations to create awareness among passengers through information, signposting, and videos to provide additional waste bins, to keep launch areas and boats clean and tidy, to train transport personnel, and to monitor behavior and results. The local partnership explicitly targets SDG 14.1 and 14.2 (United Nations SDG Partnership Platform. 2021).

Cocreational partnerships like this one are important because they translate global goals for the planet into local initiatives that involve public and private actors in diagnosing problems and designing and implementing innovative solutions. Local partnerships expand the reach of the global SDG strategy and make sure that new solutions are tailored to local needs. The collaborative efforts of local (and national and international) actors help to produce solutions that are robust in the sense of being adjustable in the face of new developments and opportunities and that contribute to enhancing local resilience by creating social capital that can be used to generate new projects. Hence, there are good reasons for making cocreational partnerships a primary strategy for achieving the UN SDGs.

## The Cocreation Process in Four Steps

To further explain what cocreation is, we shall here provide a schematic account of the four basic steps in an idealized cocreation process. The four steps are shown in [Fig. 3.3](#).

Cocreation is *initiated* by actors who bring together relevant and affected actors in a process of trust-based problem-solving. In the *design phase*, the actors explore the problems at hand, design solutions, and test prototypes. In the *implementation phase*, the actors must secure proper financing, coordinate action, and consolidate new solutions. The last step is the *evaluation phase*, where results and impacts are measured and scrutinized and successful solutions are diffused. The result of evaluation may then feedback to influence another round of initiation, design, and implements. Let's take a close look at each of these phases (see also Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

### *Initiation*

It is important to get a good start, motivate key actors to participate, and create momentum for change. There might be other similar local initiatives to learn from

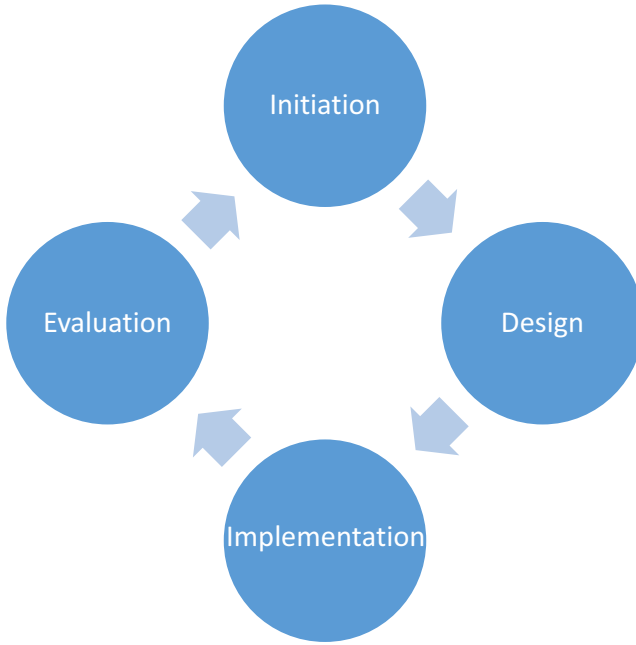


Fig. 3.3. The Four Basic Steps in the Cocreation Process.

or form an alliance with. However, public or private entrepreneurs will typically have to undertake three important task to initiate cocreation:

- (1) They must identify and describe an important and pressing problem or challenge that calls for a cocreated solution and develop and broadcast an initial idea about what a solution would look like and why it is needed. Storytelling that emphasizes the urgency of action and the feasibility and desirability of finding joint solutions is a key tool. Using mass media and social media to draw attention to problems and ideas for solutions is crucial, but needs to be combined with networking and canvassing.
- (2) They must bring together relevant and affected actors who together possess the knowledge, ideas, competences, and resources that are needed to drive change and produce a collective impact. This task calls for a careful stakeholder analysis, crucial decisions about inclusion and exclusion, and efforts to motivate actors to participate. It is important for the entrepreneurs to both attract those actors who are highly interested in finding a solution and those actors who can bring about the solution.
- (3) They must build trust among the participants and facilitate collaboration. Trusting that other actors will openly share experiences, ideas and resources, invest time and energy in finding joint solutions, respect and listen to each other, and create a space for distributed action and leadership is essential for

building collaborative relations among interested parties. Trust-building is enhanced by informal social interaction, developing transparent ground rules for interaction in meetings and other activities, and creating positive upward-going trust-spirals by unilaterally demonstrating one's trust in other actors.

### ***Design***

Design of bold, yet feasible, solutions to the many different problems underlying the formulation of the SDGs is the core purpose of cocreation. The entrepreneurs, leaders, and participants in the collaborative process must undertake three crucial tasks in this critical design phase:

- (1) They must jointly explore and redefine the problem at hand in order to make it amenable to creative problem-solving and design of solutions that are within reach of the collaborating actors. Problem exploration involves an empathetic sharing of the local experiences of those affected by the problem and new potential solutions. Weak and vulnerable groups without the strength and courage to speak up must be reached through intermediaries or carefully conducted focus group interviews. The soliciting of bottom-up inputs must be combined with input from government agencies, independent experts and academia, collection of statistical evidence, and joint fact finding through excursions, hearings, etc. The different types of input must be weighed against each other and combined so that the competing diagnoses and explanations can be scrutinized. Problem exploration involves deliberate attempts to frame the problem in ways that ensure that the actors can act upon it and hopefully solve it.
- (2) The actors must create a shared vision for joint problem-solving that reflects local needs and guides the search for promising solutions. A jointly formulated vision will give direction to the process of creative problem-solving that should be nurtured by mutual learning that goes beyond attempts to correct mistakes and adjust existing policies and should wholeheartedly embrace the quest to discover new and emerging solutions and make sense of the unknown. However, it is important to combine open-ended brainstorming and transformational learning that question common wisdom with critical scrutiny of the new and emerging ideas to identify the most promising ideas. The resulting ideas should be integrated with well-tested strategies in order to enhance the feasibility of problem solutions.
- (3) They must build and test prototypes in practice and revise and improve them until they work and seem to deliver the expected results. Prototypes are tentative solution designs that can be tested on a small scale in order to identify strengths and weakness and learn from both. Prototypes should build on a clear theory of action that makes plausible assumptions about the effects of a planned intervention. Experimental testing of prototypes can help to nip problems in the bud, avoid costly failures, and prepare for proper implementation.

### ***Implementation***

Implementation of new and promising solutions is critically important to produce collective impact. Many things can go wrong in the implementation phase where the enthusiastic and thrilling embrace of the promise of great achievements is replaced by the hard work of securing sufficient resources, coordinating action, and consolidating progress. Hence, actors involved in the cocreation of SDG solutions must deal with three challenges in the implementation phase:

- (1) They must secure proper funding for the upscaling of successful prototypes into new routinized solutions that endure long enough to have a real impact. Local government, private firms or foundations, and foreign aid donor organizations may co-finance the implementation of promising solutions and the involved actors may contribute their own time and energy.
- (2) They must coordinate action between the public and/or private actors taking part in the implementation of new solutions and create a clear division of labor between them. Since the cocreating actors frequently share the responsibility for implementation with established public bureaucracies, who perhaps played a limited role in the design phase, there is a strong need for coordination in order to avoid gaps and overlaps in the delivery of the new solution and to exploit resource complementarities that create synergy. The purpose of coordination is to mobilize as many resources as possible to maximize impact.
- (3) The actors involved in implementation must consolidate the new solution and modus operandi by means of integrating new solutions with existing practices and engaging in collaborative adaptation of the new solutions to unacknowledged conditions and unforeseen developments on the ground. It is important to remove tensions between the new solution and the context in which it is implemented in order to secure support and enhance program performance. It is also important to involve downstream actors in adapting the solution so that it fits local experiences, organizational resources, and political and economic dynamics that may prevent the use of particular tools and strategies.

### ***Evaluation***

Ideally, evaluation should be an ongoing activity, but it is especially important to evaluate whether cocreated solutions deliver the expected results and contribute to achieving one or more SDGs. Such an assessment is not only important for the participants who want to know if all the hard work paid off in the end and produced some desirable results but also for the broader society that may want to scrutinize the outcomes of cocreation and apply successful solutions in other areas and jurisdictions. Hence, the actors have to undertake three crucial tasks in the evaluation phase:

- (1) They must measure and assess outputs and outcomes in order to learn more about what works in practice and find ways of improving performance and impact. In addition to learning from the evaluation, the ability to document results and impact is often crucial for securing continued funding and financing.
- (2) They must use their own self-evaluation of the process and outcomes to produce an accessible public account of the cocreated solution and its achievements in order to allow external actors to critically scrutinize the collaborative effort and hold the participating actors to account for failures, mischief, and negative externalities. Cocreation efforts should not become secluded clubs that attract growing suspicion from external actors, but should remain open and transparent arenas that gain legitimacy from their willingness to account for their actions and respond to external advice and criticism.
- (3) Finally, they must diffuse successful solutions to other sectors, jurisdictions, and countries that may want to adopt and adapt these solutions to their own specific context. It is a moral obligation to diffuse SDG solutions so that other people and localities can benefit from the positive effects and all of the cocreating actors should act as ambassadors for the beneficial solution and use their network to spread the good news to build global momentum for change.

This schematic account of the different phases and sub-phases in a cocreation process helps to provide a clearer understanding of what cocreation entails. [Fig. 3.4](#) presents an overview of the cocreation process.

It goes without saying that the idealized schematic presented above primarily has heuristic and analytical value, since in reality cocreation is a complex and messy process with many iterations, jumps, gaps, and feedback loops. Sometimes, when the actors reach the design or implementation phase, they realize that they failed to include actors with much-needed competences and thus have to go back and adjust the range of participants. The assessment of results may also reveal flaws in the solution design that calls for reopening the discussion of the nature and character of the problem that might not be properly understood. So, in reality, the different phases and sub-phases are combined in pragmatic and complex ways. Nevertheless, the steps in cocreation discussed above will help us structure the chapters in the remainder of this book.

## **Five Cheers and a Hurray for Cocreation**

This section argues that five distinct properties of cocreation contribute to producing the solutions we need to generate shared prosperity in a sustainable planetary future. Let's look at each of these properties in turn in order to gauge their impact.



Fig. 3.4. Phases and Subphases in the Cocreation Process at a Glance.

The first distinctive property is empathy. Inspired by the new design thinking that is becoming increasingly influential in the field of public and private innovation management, cocreation is based on and seeks to incorporate the knowledge and experiences of manifold actors, including weak and vulnerable groups that normally have limited or no access to local and global decisionmaking arenas. The open and broad involvement of relevant and affected lay actors is not only motivated merely by concerns for equity and social justice but also concerns for creating solutions that effectively solve the problems at hand and meet local needs. There is no point in drilling a well to fill 50 gallon containers with clean drinking water if the local culture forbids the men who drive the only available cars to transport water containers from the well to the local villages and women and children are not strong enough to carry the containers. Such governance failures can be avoided through the empathetic sharing of local customs and experiences.

Another important feature of cocreation is its deliberate attempt to stimulate open-ended dialogue, brainstorming, and appreciative enquiry that tends to spur mutual learning and innovation. Problem-focused debates in cocreation arenas aim to involve a plethora of actors in conversations that can take different directions and can explore the problem from different perspectives. These debates encourage brainstorming of ideas and insist on appreciating the factual accounts, visions, and possible solutions advanced by different actors (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). Creating a safe and open space for multi-vocal deliberation will bring forth new ideas that disrupt common wisdom and allow for cross-fertilization of ideas, both of which are essential for producing innovative solutions. To illustrate, broad-based deliberation may contribute to recasting the increasing frequency of cloud-burst rain triggered by climate change from being an urban hazard to being an opportunity for making the city more blue and green.

A third component of cocreation that supports goal attainment is the preference for broad-based participation in defining problems and designing solutions that tends to build common ownership over new and bold solutions, which in turn reduce implementation resistance. Although it is important to prevent participation from being tokenistic, actors involved in cocreation tend to support the implementation of joint solutions even if their influence on the content of the solution has been limited. The mere possibility for participating in the shaping of new solutions, voicing an opinion, being heard and listened to, and judging the reasons for designing a solution in a certain way tends to make societal actors support cocreated solutions or at least abstain from protesting and trying to stop them. Hence, it is a common experience that letting local farmers or plantation owners participate in the development of guidelines for sustainable farming and forestry will enhance their ownership over and compliance with the new guidelines.

A fourth distinctive property of cocreation is the commitment to inclusion of both organized stakeholders and lay actors including users, citizens, and local communities. By involving and empowering actors from different organizations, sectors, and areas, cocreation expands the amount of resources available for implementation and extends the reach of new solutions because target groups or intermediaries close to these groups assume responsibility for carrying out key tasks and thus contribute to goal attainment. Hence, recruiting and training local women to help give advice on reproductive health to adolescent girls will often prove to be far more effective than relying on distribution of information through local health clinics.

A final property of cocreation worth mentioning is the learning-based implementation process and the involvement of downstream actors in the implementation and evaluation of new solutions. Developing and testing prototypes and gradually upscaling and institutionalizing effective practices help break down the artificial separation of design from implementation and ensure that new solutions are implementable. Moreover, the involvement of the actual implementors in collaborative adaptation of new solutions greatly enhances the chance that they will have an impact.

This brief assessment of the governance potential of cocreation supports the idea that cocreation provides a highly promising method for producing innovative and impactful solutions to wicked problems such as those prompting the formulation of the SDGs. While both public bureaucracies and private enterprises tend to rely on their own limited resources when solving problems, cocreation is based on the idea that it is the possession of relevant experiences, knowledge, and resources rather than rigid organizational boundaries that determines who gets to be involved in processes of creative problem-solving (Bommert, 2010).

On an even grander scale, cocreation has been shown to strengthen democratic legitimacy, increase equity, and enhance resilience (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Cocreation fosters democratic legitimacy by connecting political and administrative elites with organized stakeholders and lay actors (Sørensen, 2020). It increases equity by giving those groups who risk being left behind a voice in public problem-solving and by ensuring that new solutions are needs-based. Last, yet importantly, it enhances the resilience of local communities by empowering individual actors, building social capital, and constructing relatively permanent platforms that can be adapted to scaffold collaborative responses to disruptive problems and challenges in the future.

### **The Dark Side of Cocreation**

While there are strong reasons to trust that cocreation can help speeding up the efforts to reach the SDGs by 2030, we should not fool ourselves into believing that cocreation is a magic bullet that shoots down all problems associated with governing society and the economy. Cocreation may run into problems caused by the lack of political support, weak reflexive leadership, poor institutional design, shortage of funding, and unforeseen events such as natural disasters, wars, economic crisis, and political conflicts that prevent collaboration. Hence, some cocreation processes never get off the ground and others are aborted half-way.

Even in those cases where cocreation runs through the different phases and seems to make considerable inroads into solving some pressing problems, cocreation may encounter some structural problems that can only be avoided through careful countermeasures. In particular, cocreation may suffer from four problems (Brandsen, Steen, & Verschuere, 2018).

Cocreation is based on participation. If relevant and affected actors do not want to participate because they choose to ignore the problem at hand, are too busy, fear that they will not be heard, or rely on others to do the work they should be doing, cocreation will be seriously crippled and may falter and wane. An additional problem concerns the question of who participates and what interests are served. Researchers talk about the risk of participatory selection bias, which means that strong and resourceful actors tend to participate more frequently and actively than less resourceful actors (Agger, 2012). Biased participation patterns may lead to predisposed solutions that undermine equity by serving the interests of the stronger actors at the expense of the needs of the weaker actors. Careful stakeholder analysis, commitment to diversity in participation, empowerment of



weak and vulnerable actors, or use of spokespersons and decision rules that give the weakest actors the right to veto joint decisions can mitigate and even remove the selective participation bias that if left untamed means that the stronger actors will become even stronger.

Cocreation presupposes that the different public and/or private actors will eventually agree on actionable solutions that solve urgent problems. However, encouraging participation of actors with different experiences, ideas, and interests creates a severe risk of unsurmountable conflicts that may lead to deadlocks and discourage future participation. The risk is particularly high when available solutions that create public value for society as a whole tend to produce costs and burdens borne by a particular group of actors and compensation schemes appear to be too expensive. Professional interest mediation and attempts to think outside the box and to create innovative solutions that distribute costs and benefits more evenly may reduce the risk of stalemate and foster a positive experience with participation in cocreation that encourages future participation.

Cocreation draws together public and private actors in a joint effort to produce solutions that have public value and are valued by the public. However, these good intentions are not always fulfilled. Hence, there is a risk that cocreation unintendedly leads to the codestruction of public value. There are different sources of such value codestruction. The cocreating actors may collectively ignore or overlook warnings against negative side-effects of the favored solution. They may also lack competence and skills enabling them to exploit emerging opportunities for solving hard-to-solve problems. Finally, there are examples of over-zealous vigilante action on the part of voluntary actors who want to “police” the behavior of local actors in order to ensure compliance with new rules and regulations, but end up provoking violence or hurting people, thus undermining the very solutions they wanted to uphold. Educating, training, and mentoring the leaders and entrepreneurs involved in cocreation, together with a high degree of transparency, may considerably reduce the risk of codestruction of value, but cannot eliminate it entirely.

This brings us to the last problem inherent to cocreation, which is the lack of democratic accountability that stems from the fact that cocreation arenas are not always transparent, making it difficult to see who is responsible for core decisions and deprive us of the usual ways of sanctioning bad governance such as refusing to vote for the elected government or imposing an economic sanction. When it comes to sanctioning cocreation that has resulted in a governance failure that could and should have been avoided, the only available tool is to “name and shame” the participating actors. Although this tool maybe be necessary in some cases, it may not amount to much in terms of changing the behavior of the actors involved.

So, admittedly, there is a dark side of cocreation. However, being aware of the risks and taking precautionary and remedial action will help us to stay on the bright side of cocreation and to exploit its enormous potential to spur global change.

## **Conclusion**

The SDGs express grand ambitions that mirror the huge problems that our social and natural environment currently faces. Those who may desire to contribute to this ambitious agenda may feel overwhelmed: It feels like climbing a mountain and it is understandable that some may prefer to quit or camp rather than face an insurmountable climb. This chapter has proposed that the only way to reach the summit is through orchestrating collaboration of manifold actors in networks and partnerships that can cocreate innovative solutions. The chapter has suggested that there are many benefits of using a cocreation strategy to achieve the SDGs, in line with the guidance of Goal 17. It has also identified some of the inherent risks in cocreation processes that might lead to less desirable outcomes. To reap the benefits of cocreation while avoiding the perils on the dark side, we need to explore localization strategies and institutional designs that can successfully scaffold cocreation processes (see Chapters 4 and 5). We also need to investigate the challenges that arise at different stages of the cocreation process, including initiation, design, implementation, and evaluation (see Chapters 6 through 12). Finally, we need to know much more about how cocreation processes can be led and managed to convene actors, facilitate collaboration, and produce effective solutions (see Chapter 13).