



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - JANUARY 2012

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

CO-PRODUCTION - BREAKING OUT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE CORRAL

WHY CO-PRODUCTION SHOULD BE A THEME FOR 2012

BEYOND PUBLIC SERVICES: THE CO-PRODUCTION OF PLACE

CHANGING THE ECONOMY: THE CO-PRODUCTION OF PROFIT

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative; please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested.

This month we focus on co-production - an idea we believe is particularly important as we explore what kind of society and economy will emerge from our current crises.

CO-PRODUCTION: TIME TO BREAK OUT OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE CORRAL

A leitmotif for 2012

One of the more positive and unexpected side-effects of David Cameron's stuttering Big Society project is the way it has helped to cast a spotlight on the idea of co-production. An approach to the radical reshaping of public services, in gestation for the best part of a decade, may burst into life through the most difficult of circumstances.

For the uninitiated, co-production is the idea of 'delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbourhoods'.¹ The thesis is that services are better in quality and in value (including value for money) when the recipients are also the creators, designing and delivering services tailored to the needs that they can uniquely understand.

It's no surprise that cash-strapped councils and public bodies have leaped on the idea of co-production as a way of squaring the circle of rising demand and decreasing budgets. Much of the theory, if not necessarily all of the practice, has been co-opted for a plethora of high profile projects, from Lambeth's ['Co-operative Council'](#) to the reinvention of British Waterways as a [charitable trust](#).

Policymakers, think tanks and funders are jumping on board the bandwagon - and should be cheered for doing so. From the Big Lottery Fund's ['people powered change'](#) programme to the outpourings of Nesta² and the RSA,³ there's concern to discover and test how much can be gained from approaches that tap into the power of human relationships and social networks.

¹ Boyle, D. and Harris, M. (2009) *The challenge of co-production: how equal partnerships between professionals and the public are crucial to improving public services* London: Nesta and nef

² Boyle, D., Coote, A., Sherwood, C. and Slay, J. (2010). *Right here, right now: taking co-production into the mainstream*. London: Nesta and nef

³ Ormerod, P. (2010). *N Squared: Public policy and the power of networks*. London: RSA

A lot of the thinking here is less novel than it appears at first sight. There are some deep roots in community development theory and practice, even if some of today's self-styled social innovators prefer to imagine they were first on the scene. What is different is the prospect of introducing such mutual and co-operative approaches into mainstream public services, instead of reserving them for under-resourced community projects in deprived neighbourhoods.

There are signs, too, that co-production is starting to take root in the real world. David Boyle, one of its leading advocates in the UK, describes the spread of timebanking in his latest book, *The Human Element*.⁴ In South Wales tenants can earn credits by volunteering for their landlord, Taff Housing. This might involve befriending or helping housebound or disabled neighbours, saving the landlord the cost of intervening at a later stage when problems have spiralled out of control. The credits can be spent at local leisure or arts centres.

[Community Links](#), a charity working with disadvantaged families and young people in Newham, east London, promotes what it calls 'deep value' relationships between service users and staff, ensuring people in crisis are not passed from pillar to post under the cloak of professional expertise.⁵ It isn't described as co-production, but it rests on the same bedrock: the idea that the service user should be respected as an equal participant in service provision.

The public service corral: why limit our thinking?

While the growing interest in co-production is more than welcome, there's a caveat. The danger is that we use a narrative of paucity and inadequacy to frame a concept that should be about liberating people's potential and adding value and quality to their lives (and the lives of the professionals who engage with them).

This doesn't mean we shouldn't face up to economic and political realities. It does mean that we shouldn't accept a version of events that is challengeable.

The assumption underlying much of the current discourse about co-production is that the starting point is the need to save money.⁶ This sits within a broader story that our overriding problem is the size of the government's deficit, the reason for the problem is excessive spending, and the solution is to find ways to enable or encourage people to do for themselves what they previously expected the state to do for them.

There are elements of truth to this. The deficit is a problem because debt stores up challenges for the future, so we need confidence that any borrowing is for worthwhile investment. Some public spending has been wasteful, and more importantly, the challenges of an ageing population and scarcity of resources will pile up the future demands on the public purse. And it is plainly wrong-headed to argue against self-reliance, although we need a better understanding of how to achieve it.

However, this deficit model - focusing on the lack of public resources and the perceived deficiencies of those who use public services - shifts the focus of co-production back from the people who use services to the organisations that provide them, from the quality of ordinary people's lives to the requirements of the state.

⁴ Boyle, D. (2011). *The Human Element: Ten new rules to kickstart our failing organisations*. London: Earthscan

⁵ Bell, K. and Smerdon, M. (2011) *Deep Value: a literature review of the role of effective relationships in public services*. London: Community Links

⁶ See, for example, the IPPR/PriceWaterhouseCoopers report, *Capable Communities. Public service reform: the next chapter* (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2010)

So we need to return to and expand that broader vision of co-production proposed by Boyle and others. That means breaking out of the public service corral and understanding that what is on offer is a different way of thinking about the places we live in and the way we do business there, not just a sociopolitical fix.

Changing where we live: the co-production of place

If the vision of co-production is one in which all share in creating the frameworks and infrastructure for their lives, where we live and how we work must be key elements of that approach. That includes, but goes well beyond, the services provided by central and local government.

Human history shows how places are contested as well as shared. One conundrum is how to maximise the sharing while preserving character and individuality. Another, and more pressing, one is how to recreate a culture of sharing in a context that equates place with property and a stake in society with asset ownership.

It's no surprise that the concept of 'the commons' is being explored anew⁷ at a time when the follies of our obsession with corporate and individual wealth have been brutally exposed by recession and austerity. There has been an upsurge of interest in community gardens, cooperative arts projects, and the creation of shared spaces.

Over the last year the spotlight on the decline and demise of many of our high streets has revealed a major opportunity for the co-production of place. Last June Urban Pollinators coordinated a submission to the Mary Portas review outlining the idea of a '[21st century agora](#)' where town centres are defined by their communities, not just by the demands of property owners and retailers.

That idea was taken up within the review itself,⁸ which made the key point that economic capital is created through social capital - a reversal of the standard understanding of how town centres work. The proposal for 'town teams' offers a model for bringing people together to co-create the physical heart of their communities.

Town teams will only ever be as good as their vision and understanding, however. The ideas of co-production can help here: if we see the town centre or high street as belonging to the wider public rather than simply serving their requirements as consumers, we can end up with very different visions of what can be achieved in these spaces. From space for start-up business to learning centres and voluntary projects, we can reinvigorate high streets with ideas and projects that spark social and business relationships. That means moving from community consultation to community-led design.

A few months ago we outlined the idea of '[placemaking with dirty hands](#)', showing how local growing and food production can help to redefine and reimagine a town. Drawn from our links with [Incredible Edible Todmorden](#), we showed how the shared language of food can become a way of rethinking physical space and the local economy. In places like Todmorden, local people often simply get on with making their ideas happen because figures of authority in the public and private sectors are too enmeshed in their systems and processes to respond to the messier visions that arise from local communities.

The concept of co-production weaves together the processes of public agencies and private business with the initiative and agility of community projects, developing forms of dialogue that respect the talents and energy

⁷ Holt-Gimenez, E. (2011). *From Food Monopolies to Food Commons*. [slowfood.com](#), 4 October 2011

⁸ Portas, M. (2011). *The Portas Review: An independent review into the future of our high streets*. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

of all rather than pitching parties against each other. This is especially important when it comes to the role of the local authority, which needs to be a facilitator and steward in developing and animating places.

This can involve some testing discussions and re-examination of who holds power, how and why. But the starting point has to be that all have a stake in a place, whether they have an official function or not.

In Brentford, west London, local traders and residents got fed up with waiting for a redevelopment intended to resurrect the local high street's fortunes. In 2006 they decided to take matters into their own hands, coming up with [their own vision](#) for the future of the town centre.

The vision developed by local people, working with local councillors and the chamber of commerce, shows what can happen when people are able to take responsibility for their own future. Sustainable living, support for local trade, art and culture and a celebration of the town's history are all part of the mix.

Changing the way we work: the co-production of profit

In tough economic times, the idea of co-production is especially pertinent. The standard austerity formula is to survive by cutting hours and wages, reducing staff and ensuring 'competitiveness' by systematically reducing the rewards on offer to employees and the welfare entitlements of those not in work. Those with fewest resources of their own suffer most, with the promise that when good times return they might reap some of the rewards.

This principle of 'last in, first out' has brought the UK one million unemployed young people and a growing gulf between the haves and have-nots. A slew of think tanks have lamented the effects on the living standards of ordinary households and the alienation of young people from society.⁹ The Occupy movement has memorably (if contentiously) characterised the problem as that of the 1% versus the 99%. The idea of profit has become regarded with hostility because it is so seldom shared equitably.

Yet that need not be the case. Profit should be a shared gain accrued by all involved in a business activity, as a reward for work, knowledge and intelligent risk-taking. That work, knowledge and enterprise add value that can be shared in the form of pay or improved quality of life. It's the principle behind the [John Lewis Partnership](#), where all staff share in the firm's success, or the [Co-op](#), where customers can gain a dividend when the company does well (or can donate it to a good cause).

Most of the discussion of social enterprise in recent years has concerned how to put enterprise into the social sector in order to save money or obtain better value. The real prize is to put social values into the 'enterprise' sector - ensuring that business activity profits entrepreneurs, workers, customers and society at large to the maximum possible extent.

This involves more than setting aside a portion of profits for 'corporate social responsibility'. It means co-producing private enterprise in the same way that we are beginning to think about co-producing public services. This requires a re-examination of ideas of leadership and management, so that instead of focusing on heroic individuals we stress the value of beneficial connections.

⁹ See, for example, Whittaker, M. and Savage, L. (2011). *Missing Out: why ordinary workers are experiencing growth without gain* London: Resolution Foundation

One of the organisations involved in our submission to the Portas Review was [WiganPlus](#), which is developing a local smartcard for Wigan. The idea began as a local loyalty scheme designed to encourage people to support locally based and independent shops. It's now starting to become much more than that.

The idea, in brief, is that cardholders accumulate points which they can spend in local stores or use in exchange for deals such as surplus cinema seats or access to leisure facilities. Where it gets exciting is that WiganPlus wants cardholders to be able to gain points through voluntary activity or by engaging in pro-social activities such as quitting smoking.

They can then see a direct link between the rewards they can access with their card and the efforts they make for their health or their neighbours. Everyone profits, either financially or socially.

By putting social and financial benefits into the same pot we can develop a fuller idea of the value of a business and create forms of exchange that spread value within the communities a business serves.

If a fledgeling business like WiganPlus looks too newfangled for inspiration, try one that's been around for more than half a century. [Scott Bader](#), which describes itself as an 'independent common trusteeship company', provides a model of coproduction for enterprise.

A multinational chemicals company with a turnover of £180m a year, it employs more than 500 people and has its headquarters in Northamptonshire. In April 2011 it celebrated 60 years of its 'commonwealth' - a structure that encourages employee-led ownership and governance, prevents the sale of shares to external shareholders, and puts a portion of profits into community activities chosen by the workforce.

Scott Bader doesn't deride the idea of profit - it wouldn't survive in the commercial world if it did - but it has a bigger idea of profit than the personal enrichment of its executives. It sees common ground between its success as a business and the wellbeing of its employees and the communities they live in.

By focusing on specific places and the people in them as well as on concepts and policies, the co-production approach can be tested, explored and developed in the real world. In this way the principles of co-production can be applied to public services, the local environment and business without creating artificial barriers between different sectoral interests.

What co-production offers is what we need in 2012: a chance for really big thinking about society, place and business, starting from a scale that is small enough to be human.

IN OTHER NEWS...

- Urban Pollinators has now been going for a year, building on our previous work with New Start magazine and NS+, the consultancy which was our previous incarnation. We've reviewed the last twelve months on our website - [see what we've been up to](#) and the impact we've made.
- We're starting a major new project with Groundwork UK this month, looking at the role and value of green spaces in local communities. If you know of projects that have inspired you or new approaches to green space that could be suitable case studies, please [get in touch](#).

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We always welcome your comments and feedback. You can [contact us via our website](#) to have your say, update your details or suggest ideas for future newsletters and articles. You can also view details of recent projects [here](#), or read what people are saying about us [here](#).

And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.