



„KEY LESSONS ON MLG CO-CREATION“

KEY MESSAGES

What co-creation is: Co-creation is a way of governing in which public authorities work with citizens, civil society, businesses, and knowledge actors across sectors and levels of government to jointly define problems and design, test, implement, and evaluate policies and services.

Why it matters for EU multilevel governance: In an EU system where authority is shared across the EU, national, regional, and local levels, co-creation can help close gaps between institutions and people, improving policy coordination while addressing democratic deficits and strengthening trust in public decision-making.

Main benefits: Used well, co-creation can strengthen democratic legitimacy and trust, produce more context-fit and innovative solutions, support more efficient and adaptive implementation, and broaden equity and social cohesion by including under-represented groups in decision-making.

Key risks and limitations: When poorly designed or weakly embedded in MLG, co-creation can become tokenistic, blur accountability, amplify territorial capacity gaps, struggle to scale successful pilots, and reinforce power and data asymmetries between well-resourced actors and others.

Main recommendations:

- Embed co-creation early and systematically in EU, national, regional, and local policy cycles, not just at the implementation stage.
- Guarantee genuine and inclusive participation with clear mandates, transparency about how inputs are used, and support for under-represented groups.
- Invest in capacities, intermediaries, and digital/evidence infrastructures that connect co-creation across levels and territories.
- Monitor, evaluate, and adapt co-creation practices and legal frameworks so effective models can scale, and weaker ones can be improved.



INTRODUCTION

In Europe, public governance spans across the EU, national, regional, and local jurisdictions and faces the challenge of coordinating policies effectively while maintaining democratic legitimacy. This multi-level governance¹ (MLG) framework formally opens space for non-institutional actors, but in practice it is often treated as a narrowly institutional mode of decision-making focused on relations between public authorities across levels. Co-creation, an approach in which public authorities, citizens, civil society organisations, experts, and businesses collaborate to design and implement policies or services, has emerged as a promising strategy to address these challenges and to help MLG realise its full potential as an inclusive, cross-level governance framework.

This Policy Brief draws on a literature report on co-creation and MLG² to examine how co-creation can contribute to solving pressing public problems within an MLG framework. It highlights key findings on co-creation's conceptual foundations, benefits, challenges, and the roles of various actors across governance levels. The Brief also outlines what co-creation means for policy integration, democratic legitimacy, and public value generation across the EU, and provides concrete policy recommendations, along with practical "dos" and "don'ts," for public authorities, participating citizens, and other stakeholders.



WHAT IS CO-CREATION?

Co-creation is a form of participatory governance in which public and private actors, including ordinary citizens, jointly define problems and design or even directly implement solutions that generate public value (e.g., visions, plans, policies, services). To achieve this goal, co-creation mobilises different knowledge, resources, and skills to improve outcomes and produce innovative solutions.

Three core elements distinguish co-creation in public governance:

- **Active citizen engagement:** Citizens are active contributors (e.g., co-designers, co-implementers), not passive recipients of services. They contribute their effort, ideas, data, and feedback at various stages: from identifying needs and shaping policies to helping implement and later evaluate solutions. This contrasts with traditional top-down decision-making and fosters a sense of ownership among participants.
- **Focus on public value:** Co-creation efforts aim to generate tangible public value or benefits. The goal is not participation for its own sake, but better outcomes, such as improved services, policies that meet local needs, or new knowledge. In essence, the co-creation process must produce something of value (e.g. greater community well-being, trust, or innovation) that justifies the effort.

¹ The term multi-level governance denotes the necessity to make decisions about public policies and public services across multiple (public and private) jurisdictions that are not integrated hierarchically.

² RECODE-MLG Deliverable 2.1 «Co-creation and Multilevel-Governance: A Literature Report» prepared by Marjan Marjanović, Yannis Papadopoulos, Philipp Trein, and Sean Müller.

- **Cross-boundary collaboration:** Direct participation of citizens (and other stakeholders) occurs across institutional and sectoral boundaries. Co-creation brings together diverse perspectives and knowledge, e.g., residents working with multiple government departments or agencies, rather than confining input to a single authority or sector. Co-creation values both local insights and scientific knowledge.



Co-creation is more than participation. It is a structured, power-sharing approach that brings together citizens and public authorities to jointly define and solve collective problems. Its distinct value lies in combining diverse knowledge systems, strengthening democratic practice, and enabling collaborative problem-solving.



KEY ACTORS OF CO-CREATION

Effective co-creation involves a network of interdependent actors, each contributing different resources and playing specific roles:

- **Public authorities (EU, national, regional, local):** Government bodies act as orchestrators, provide the mandate, resources, and legal space for co-creation. They convene actors, set overall goals and rules, and ensure that results feed into formal decision-making. Their role is to open decision chains to wider input while safeguarding accountability, rights, and compliance with legal frameworks.
- **Citizens and community groups:** Citizens (whether individual residents, service users, or organised community groups) are at the heart of co-creation. They act as co-designers, co-deciders, and sometimes co-implementers: identifying needs, proposing solutions, and helping deliver initiatives. Through deliberative forums, citizen assemblies, neighbourhood workshops, or digital platforms, they bring lived experience and local knowledge that make policies and services better tailored to real community needs.
- **Civil society organisations:** Non-governmental organisations, civic associations, and advocacy groups often act as facilitators and watchdogs. They bring experience in community organising and participatory methods, help design inclusive processes, and represent underserved or marginalised interests. In multilevel settings, civil society networks can function as boundary-spanning actors, linking local initiatives to national and European debates and maintaining a two-way flow of information between communities and policymakers.
- **Knowledge actors (experts):** Universities, research institutes, think tanks, and other knowledge brokers contribute subject-matter expertise and analytical capacity. They help generate and interpret evidence, design and evaluate participatory processes, and translate complex data into accessible insights. Their involvement helps ensure that co-creation is evidence-informed and supports learning across projects, sectors, and governance levels.
- **Business partners:** Businesses and industries (including utilities and social enterprises) support co-creation by bringing funding, innovation, technical expertise, and scaling capacity. They may provide new technologies, operational know-how, or co-funding for pilots and help turn collaboratively developed ideas into practical, sustainable solutions. Public authorities typically monitor this involvement so that commercial incentives align with public value.



Co-creation works best when these roles are clearly distributed, understood, and accepted. Public authorities provide mandate and coordination, citizens and civil society offer local insight and mobilisation, firms contribute tools and implementation capacity, and knowledge actors support evidence and evaluation.



KEY BENEFITS

Many benefits are attributed to co-creation, cutting across democratic, policy, and social outcomes. Key benefits include:

- **More effective and innovative solutions:** By bringing together expert, organisational, and lived “lay” knowledge, co-creation supports joint problem framing and reduces blind spots. Collaborative experiments such as living labs and co-design workshops create safe spaces to test and refine new ideas. Through iterative learning that draws on diverse forms of knowledge, decisions become better aligned with real-world needs and specific local contexts.
- **Efficiency and capacity gains:** Co-creation can make public action more efficient by pooling resources, skills, and information across actors. Early engagement and joint design reduce costly mismatches between services and user needs. Digital tools can lower transaction costs and speed up feedback loops. At the same time, repeated collaboration builds skills and relationships that strengthen the overall problem-solving capacity of institutions and communities.
- **Enhanced democratic legitimacy and trust:** Co-creation makes governance more transparent, participatory, and responsive. It strengthens input legitimacy (who participates, accepts and how fair that feels), throughput legitimacy (how open and well-run the process is), and output legitimacy (how effective the results are to address the underlying problem). When people can see how their contributions shape concrete outcomes, they are more likely to trust institutions and accept difficult choices.
- **Greater inclusion and social cohesion:** Co-creation broadens who shapes choices, elevating under-represented groups from informants to recognised participants and co-deciders. Approaches that value experiential, local, Indigenous, or minority perspectives and use redistributive designs (for example, participatory budgeting formulas prioritising underserved areas) help align priorities and resources with those most affected. This can lead to fairer outcomes, fewer grievances, and stronger social ties and solidarity.



Co-creation has the potential to strengthen governance where it matters most. It can produce more context-fit and innovative solutions, improve efficiency and governance capacity, enhance democratic legitimacy, and broaden equity and inclusion. Together, these gains can help deliver policies that are more effective, more accepted, and more equitable.



CHALLENGES OF CO-CREATION

Without careful design and support, co-creation initiatives may fall short of their principles and ideals and even make things worse. Common challenges include:

- **Tokenism and power imbalances:** A key risk is symbolic and skewed participation, where citizen input is collected but has little real influence, or where only well-resourced or "usual suspect" groups dominate. If authorities retain full decision-making authority and use co-creation primarily as a "window-dressing" tool, trust erodes and existing inequalities deepen.
- **High coordination and capacity demands:** Co-creation is resource- and time-intensive. Designing inclusive processes, convening diverse actors, and maintaining engagement require strong facilitation and administrative support. Smaller municipalities or under-resourced organisations may struggle to run high-quality processes alongside routine tasks.
- **Institutional and legal limitations:** Innovative co-creation practices can clash with existing rules, procedures, or organisational cultures. Legal frameworks, procurement rules, or risk-averse administrations may limit how far citizen input can shape outcomes. Without adjustments to mandates and procedures, co-creation risks staying at the margins.
- **Quality and continuity issues:** One-off initiatives without follow-up or feedback rarely change how systems work. Measuring the added value of co-creation, both in terms of process quality and policy outcomes, is also difficult, and weak evaluation undermines learning. Moreover, not all issues are suited to co-creation. Without clear criteria on when and how to use it, processes can become unfocused or ineffective, raising expectations without delivering results and leading to disappointment or participation fatigue.



Co-creation can be demanding and uneven in practice. Tokenism, participation gaps, high coordination needs, and legal, financial or administrative constraints can limit its impact. Without sustained support and genuinely influential participation, processes risk falling short of their democratic and policy goals.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY INTEGRATION, LEGITIMACY, AND PUBLIC VALUE IN THE EU

Co-creation offers important implications for how policies are designed and implemented in multi-level systems, directly addressing some of the core concerns of EU governance:

- **Vertical policy integration:** Co-creation can improve vertical policy integration by involving actors at multiple levels, including citizens and stakeholders, in joint problem-solving. Local realities feed into higher-level policy design, while EU and national goals (for example, on the green and digital transitions) are adapted to on-the-ground conditions. This two-way flow reduces implementation gaps and allows local innovations and feedback to inform broader policy adjustments.
- **Public value creation:** In complex, cross-cutting domains, such as climate action, urban development, mobility, land use, public health, or digital innovation, effectiveness hinges on local uptake and citizen behaviour. Co-creation can help align EU and national priorities with local needs and capacities, generating solutions that are more usable and relevant. It can also create system-wide benefits: stronger relationships between institutions and communities, richer knowledge bases, and learning that can be transferred across places and sectors.
- **Democratic legitimacy:** MLG often suffers from a perceived democratic deficit, as citizens feel that decisions are taken far away from them. Co-creation can mitigate this problem, by embedding democratic practices into cross-level policymaking and giving citizens and stakeholders a meaningful voice in shaping policies that affect them. In the EU context, instruments such as citizens' panels or cross-border stakeholder forums can complement representative institutions by adding channels for input and oversight, thereby strengthening accountability and acceptance.



Co-creation strengthens MLG when it helps align policies across levels and bring citizen voice into decision-making. Its value depends on early integration, stable channels for knowledge flow, and supportive institutions that can translate local insight into higher-level action.

LIMITATIONS AND RISKS OF INTEGRATING CO-CREATION INTO MLG



Embedding co-creation into MLG creates structural and operational limitations, which arise from the complexity of aligning collaborative processes with multi-tiered decision systems, uneven capacities, and existing institutional constraints:

- **Accountability challenges of MLG remain:** Integrating co-creation into decision chains can blur responsibilities across EU, national, regional, and local levels. When authority is shared among many actors, accountability becomes harder to trace and blame-shifting becomes easier. Most co-creation occurs locally, while decisive mandates (laws, regulations, budgets) sit upstream. Without channels that allow local insights from citizens, civil society, and businesses to shape early agenda-setting, participation risks remaining reactive and symbolic, weakening perceived legitimacy.

- **Territorial capacity gaps and unequal access:** Not all authorities can (or wish to) sustain co-creation to the same standard. Municipalities and regions vary widely in staff, facilitation skills, and digital infrastructure, creating uneven opportunities for participation and learning. Actors with limited capacity may struggle to maintain engagement or feed lessons into higher-level policymaking. Co-creation then becomes strongest where communities are already well-resourced, reinforcing geographic and social inequalities.
- **Scaling and coordination challenges across levels:** Successful local co-creation initiatives often prove difficult to translate into broader policies. Scaling requires templates, metrics, translation, and procedural rules that can erode the contextual nuance that made local solutions effective. Conversely, without clear pathways for upward learning, pilots remain isolated and rarely inform national or EU programming. Misaligned timelines between iterative co-creation and fixed budget or legislative cycles further constrain coordination and can reduce co-creation to late-stage consultation.
- **Data governance and power asymmetries in cross-level processes:** Effective integration relies on smooth information flows between actors and levels, yet legal requirements, technical incompatibilities, and fragmented data systems often impede this. Multilevel venues can also be dominated by well-resourced stakeholders or intermediary organisations acting as de facto gatekeepers. Without safeguards, agenda-setting and access may become skewed, limiting representation and undermining the inclusive ambitions of co-creation.



Co-creation can strengthen MLG, but only if its structural challenges are addressed. Diffuse accountability, unequal territorial capacities, cultural differences, weak scaling pathways, legal and technical constraints, and cross-level power imbalances can undermine both inclusiveness and impact.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CO-CREATION IN MLG



Drawing on the above findings, the following recommendations are offered to EU and member/partner states, as well as regional and local policymakers looking to harness co-creation for better multi-level coordination:

- **Embed co-creation in policy cycles at all levels:** Move beyond ad-hoc pilots and integrate co-creation into regular policymaking, from EU agenda-setting to local implementation. This includes requiring or incentivising co-creation in major programmes, using EU funding to reward genuine collaborative design, and opening key stages (problem definition, option generation, implementation, and evaluation) to structured stakeholder input.
- **Ensure genuine and inclusive participation:** Design processes with real influence on decisions and balanced representation, including groups that are often under-represented (for example, minorities, rural residents, youth, and the digitally disadvantaged). Provide support to lower participation barriers and formalise how input will be used (for instance, by publicly responding to proposals or committing to integrate recommendations where feasible). Where legally and practically possible, share decision-making power so co-creation bodies have a mandate, not just an advisory role.

- **Build capacity and provide resources:** Invest in skills, tools, and organisational structures for co-creation. Train officials and facilitators in participatory methods, conflict resolution, and cross-cultural communication. Develop accessible digital engagement tools and support knowledge-exchange networks or toolkits at the EU and national levels. Allocate stable funding both for the participatory process and for implementing agreed ideas.
- **Strengthen multi-level coordination and knowledge sharing:** Create or reinforce mechanisms that connect co-creation efforts across levels, such as regional or transnational bridging bodies that channel insights between local projects and higher-level decision-makers. Support organisations, platforms, and networks that enable municipalities, regions, civil society, and EU institutions to exchange experiences and methods, enabling successful approaches to be adapted and scaled.
- **Monitor, evaluate, and adapt:** Introduce a systematic evaluation of co-creation, with indicators for both process quality (e.g., participant diversity, degree of influence) and outcomes (e.g., policy performance, citizen satisfaction, cross-level integration). Use experimental trials and comparative research to identify what works, and be willing to revise laws, guidelines, and internal procedures that unintentionally hinder collaboration and participation.



Co-creation must move from ad-hoc pilots and become a structured part of policy cycles at all levels. That means institutionalising meaningful and inclusive participation, investing in capacity and resources, building strong cross-level coordination and knowledge-sharing mechanisms, and continuously monitoring and adapting institutional frameworks.

8. “DOS” AND “DON’TS” OF CO-CREATION IN MLG

Authorities



- Define a clear purpose and scope (what is and is not up for co-creation)
- Ensure the process is feasible in time and resources (realistic timeframe, staff, budget)

Citizens and stakeholders



- Clarify your expectations and mandate (what you want to achieve and whom you represent)
- Engage with both opportunities and constraints (legal, financial, administrative)

- Clarify mandates and decision rights (how results will feed into formal decisions)
- Appoint a lead institution/team with boundary-spanning authority recognized across levels
- Select trusted facilitators who are seen as impartial by all parties
- Design for inclusion and accessibility (reach under-represented groups, mix online/offline)
- Communicate constraints, risks, and trade-offs openly from the start
- Build in feedback loops (report back what was adopted or not, and why)

- Bring concrete knowledge and experiences from practice, communities, and users
- Be prepared for negotiation and compromise, not just presenting demands
- Stay engaged over time (follow-up meetings, feedback on drafts, implementation)
- Help link local ideas to broader strategies (national plans, EU objectives)
- Support monitoring and evaluation, sharing what works and what does not
- Coordinate with peers and community groups to ensure broad representation and avoid speaking only from individual experience

Authorities



- Don't launch co-creation when key decisions are already fixed
- Don't treat co-creation as a one-off event without follow-up or learning
- Don't underestimate coordination and facilitation costs in multi-level settings
- Don't ignore political and distributional risks (winners/losers, potential backlash)
- Don't allow processes to be dominated by the "usual suspects" or single powerful actors

Citizens and stakeholders



- Don't expect instant or transformative change from a single process
- Don't assume all proposals will be fully adopted; some will be adapted or rejected
- Don't treat co-creation as a substitute for elected institutions; decisions still go through formal channels
- Don't disengage at the first setback; iteration and disagreement are normal
- Don't crowd out other voices; be mindful of engagement and representation and be open to deliberate

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