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Enabling and Constraining Conditions for Co-production with Vulnerable Users: A Case Study of Refugee Services

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ABSTRACT

This article explores co-production as processes occurring at three levels: at the level of service interactions, at the organizational level, and at the system level. We propose next that two forms of co-production may take place at these three levels: co-production through direct participation and co-production through representation. We use these conceptualizations to outline a framework for analyzing conditions for co-production with vulnerable users, and we explore the applicability of the framework in the context of public services for refugees. Insights from the case are finally used as a basis for evoking more general discussions on co-production with vulnerable users.

KEYWORDS

Co-production; co-creation; public services; vulnerable users; refugee immigrants

Introduction



Co-production and co-creation have become popular concepts that scholars and practitioners understand and use somewhat differently (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Brandsen et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015). While the concepts of co-production and co-creation tend to be used interchangeably, some scholars prefer the concept co-creation when focusing on service settings because the term “co-production” has associations with industries and the production of goods, which may obscure the interactive nature of services (Osborne, 2018). In this article, we understand co-production as participative processes defined as “the voluntary or involuntary involvement of public service users in any of the design, management, delivery and/or evaluation of public services” (Osborne et al., 2016, p. 640).

Research on co-production in public services has developed and matured over the years, and the literature has shifted from being largely agenda setting to become more oriented toward fact finding (Verschuere et al., 2018). Thus, a growing body of research literature addresses questions of why, how, and with what effects public services are co-produced. This includes also critical studies that shed light on the challenges of co-production due to power structures and unequal opportunities to participate among users and citizens (Dietrich et al., 2017; Donetto et al., 2015; Morrison & Dearden, 2013). The latter has been highlighted as a pertinent issue that deserves more research attention, especially

in the context of services dealing with vulnerable users and marginalized citizens.

Consequently, understanding the conditions for co-production with vulnerable users becomes paramount, and this is the focus of our paper. By conditions, we mean factors that influence co-production or co-production efforts. These conditions can be enabling or constraining, and we argue that insights into these conditions need to be understood in relation to different forms of co-production. Thus, the aim of this paper is to outline a framework for analyzing enabling and constraining conditions for the co-production of services with vulnerable users.

Scholars in public administration and management have recently highlighted the needs for further developing discourses on co-production through meta-dialogues on the *outcomes* of co-production (See for instance, Osborne et al., 2021). This is addressed through conceptual debates on value and value creation in public service contexts based on service management theories. These meta-dialogues are important for advancing research on the outcomes and impact of co-production, which is still not well understood (Voorberg et al., 2015). However, these dialogues cannot evolve in isolation from debates and research on the (pre)conditions for co-production. Understanding co-production as value creation, require understanding of which voices that are heard; which influence they might have and specifically how marginalized or often silenced voices can be better included (Donetto et al., 2015).

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Hence, alongside the meta-dialogues on outcomes and value of co-production, there is need for meta-dialogues on the (pre)conditions for co-production. There is a tendency to blur this distinction. For instance, Osborne et al. (2021) develop a matrix of value creation which places co-production within a ‘cluster of value-creation processes’. By introducing a framework for analyzing the conditions for co-production, we contribute to make this distinction between conditions and outcomes clearer. Thus, we add conceptual clarity to the increasingly complex scholarly dialogues on co-production, and we anchor the conceptual discussions in an empirical context.

More specifically, we explore the relevance and applicability of the framework based on a case study of co-production of public services targeting newly arrived refugees. Refugee immigrants can be termed “vulnerable users,” especially in the early stages after settlement, because they lack language proficiency and are often not familiar with cultural codes and with how public services work in a welfare state system. Moreover, many refugee immigrants come from war zones and totalitarian regimes, and they may carry traumatic experiences, such as losses of relatives and friends, and be struggling with mental and physical health problems.

The term “vulnerable” should, however, be used cautiously because it may downgrade and blur the strength and resourcefulness that is also characteristic of this group of citizens and service users. Living under harsh conditions and then being able to migrate is perhaps more an indication of strength than vulnerability. Moreover, while refugee immigrants share some common traits, they also comprise a highly heterogenic group for which the term “vulnerable” might be a more fitting label for some than for others. One should also be aware of the somewhat patronizing elements ingrained in the term “vulnerable” and be sensitive to the fact that discursively constructing a group as vulnerable may set certain mental constraints for co-production.

We propose that vulnerability in a public service context can be understood as related to a state of powerlessness in interactions with the public service system. This definition is based on how vulnerable consumers are defined in the marketing literature (Baker et al., 2005; Dietrich et al., 2017). We propose further that these states of powerlessness have different causes within and across user groups. Co-production represents strategies for challenging structures that create these states of powerlessness, but the causes of powerlessness set at the same time, constraints for how co-production can be performed. These reflections on vulnerability form the backdrop for our framework and set premises for how

we approach and understand vulnerability in the context of refugee services. We continue by outlining the contours of our framework and by positioning it in relation to concepts and theories in the co-production literature.

Theoretical background and conceptual framework

The literature on co-production is vast, and there are various definitions and understandings of the term. Its origin is commonly associated with the work of Elinor Ostrom, who defines co-production as “the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization” (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1073). In this understanding, co-production challenges the notion of service users as passive “clients” who are acted upon by a service organization. The citizens are instead cast in a more active role in the production of goods and services that affect them. Ostrom (1996) addresses on one hand how the idea of co-production challenges the conventional separation between civil society and the public and private sectors, and she refers to co-production as means to breach “the great divide” between sectors. On the other hand, she draws attention to the service level and the ways in which frontline employees, as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1971), may use their room for discretion to co-produce public services.

In this article, we focus mainly on the role of refugee immigrants as co-producers of the public services that directly affect them. Even with this more confined understanding of co-production, there is still a need for a further specified vocabulary that can be used to analyze the different aspects of co-production. We next present literature that has made such attempts at systematizing and operationalizing the co-production concept for analytical purposes.

There have been different attempts to bring clarity to the fuzziness and confusion regarding the co-production vocabulary (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2016; Park, 2019). Nabatchi et al. (2017) seek to provide clarity within the public administration literature and focus on co-production as different forms of participation in public services that may take place on different levels and at different stages, systemized in a co-production typology. Co-production is also used as an umbrella label, which is further specified with sub-categories of interrelated concepts, such as co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-evaluation (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2016).

While these efforts to develop a clearer, more specified, and shared vocabulary on co-production are needed, it also adds confusion because the debates take

place in parallel, and the same terms tend to be used in reference to different kinds of activities.

We choose to examine one strand of the literature that goes deeper into theorizing co-production by bringing together understandings of co-production from the public administration literature with service management literature (Osborne et al., 2012, 2016). We find this understanding of services as inevitably “co-produced” as a fruitful entrance to understand the conditions of co-production of services with refugee immigrants.

When drawing on insights from service management theories, co-production is understood as a defining trait of service interactions rather than something added on to improve the service process (Osborne et al., 2016). Following this argument, services are per definition co-produced between service providers and service recipients, and the co-production may lead to value co-creation (Grönroos, 2019; Vargo & Lusch, 2008) or, alternatively, to value co-destruction (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). Thus, co-production is then not seen as essentially a good thing; it is rather seen as inalienable and inherent to the service process. In this theoretical landscape, service organizations are seen as supporters or facilitators of the users’ value creation processes (Grönroos, 2019). The public services can support and facilitate the users’ value creation, but in the end, it is the users that are the lead actors. If this premise is accepted, it makes sense to argue that the users need to be involved in co-production collectively or individually at different stages of the service processes.

A way of approaching this is proposed by Strokosch and Osborne (2016), who sort the different ways of co-producing services into three modes of co-production: consumer, participative, and enhanced. We draw inspiration from this, but we propose a vocabulary that is more intuitive, separating between co-production as occurring on three levels. To differentiate between levels, we also draw inspiration from Nabatchi et al. (2017):

- Co-production in service interactions: This refers to co-production as intrinsic to service interactions. It can be involuntary, and it is part of the daily operation of services. This kind of co-production thus mainly concerns the relations between service users and frontline employees and the management of the individual users’ cases.
- Co-production at the organizational level: This refers to the ways service users may be involved in development, planning, and evaluation processes with the aim of developing or improving existing services at the organizational level. This kind of co-production may take place between users, frontline

employees, decision makers, and managers on higher administrative or even policy levels, but it takes place outside the regular service interactions through workshops of different kinds of participative platforms.

- Co-production at the system level: This refers to processes of co-design and co-creation of innovations, which may fundamentally transform or recreate the services at the system level. This kind of co-production may take place between users, frontline employees, and decision makers on higher administrative and policy levels, and it addresses challenges and the potential for change beyond the boundaries of a single service organization.

Expanding on how co-production may occur on these three levels, we find that co-production in service settings involving vulnerable users requires an understanding of “representative co-production” as a supplement to direct forms of participation. This term has been coined by Eriksson (2019) to capture how co-production processes may often entail the indirect involvement of service users. Eriksson (2019) uses the concept to shed light on the indirect involvement of hard-to-reach groups, and he defines representative co-production as “The joint and voluntary involvement of group representatives in evaluating, designing, and delivering public services that enable value co-creation for other group members” (Eriksson, 2019, p. 298).

Representative co-production is thus used in reference to situations in which individuals have roles as representatives for a particular user group, and they participate in co-production processes on their behalf. We suggest a broader use of the concept “representative co-production” to capture the various ways in which the voices of users are represented by other actors in co-production processes. As pointed out by various scholars, engaging user groups labeled as vulnerable can be challenging for different reasons. Representative co-production can be a way to overcome these obstacles, but it is also a strategy filled with dilemmas. For instance, to what degree the involved actors are in fact suitable representatives for the given user groups is an empirical question and matter of discussion dependent on the service context. This brings us to the final element of our framework, which concerns the causes of vulnerability or states of powerlessness in relation to the public service system in a given service setting. We outline our framework for analyzing co-production with vulnerable users by bringing these three elements together: level of co-production, representative co-production, and forms of vulnerability. An illustration of the framework is provided in [Figure 1](#).

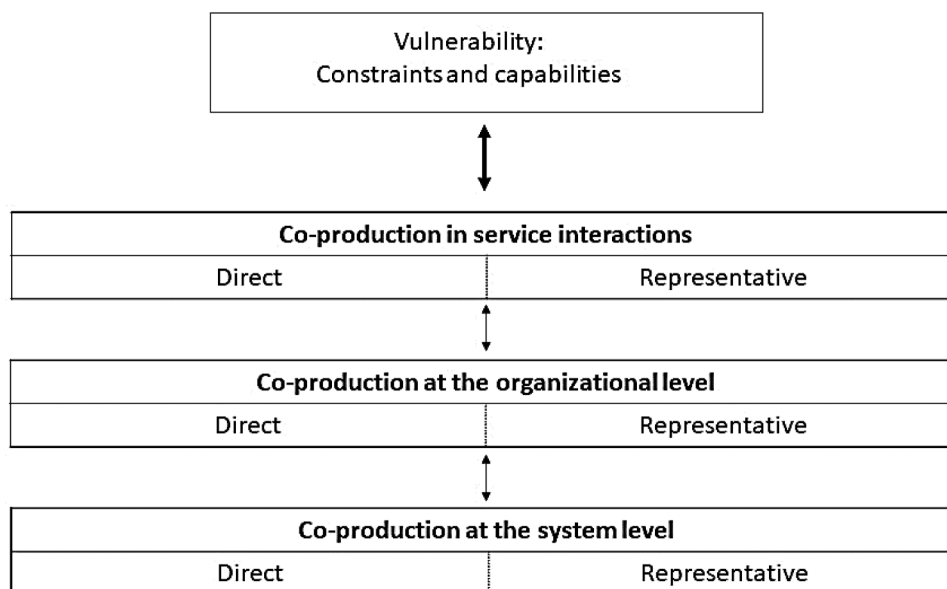


Figure 1. Framework for analyzing co-production with vulnerable users.

The framework is meant as a heuristic tool for analyzing conditions for co-production with vulnerable users. The framework consists of three main elements: First, it distinguishes between co-production as processes that may occur on the three different levels: Within service interactions, at organizational levels and at system levels. Second, it suggests that co-production at each of these three levels may take form as direct or representative co-production, or as a combination of the two. Third, the framework sets vulnerability as an overarching element, suggesting that various forms of vulnerability evoke different constraints and capabilities when it comes to co-production. Analyzing and understanding these capabilities and constraints provides a foundation for identifying appropriate co-production strategies across the different levels. At each level, it may be necessary to shift between direct and representative forms of co-production, or to combine the two, depending on the forms of vulnerability in question. For instance, co-production with users lacking language or cognitive capabilities to verbally express needs and preferences may require mediators and representatives who can gain user insights through means other than verbal dialogue.

Thus, the first bidirectional arrow is meant to illustrate that different forms of vulnerability set the premises for how co-production processes unfold, and the co-production processes may in turn affect and inform new understandings of constraints and capabilities linked to different forms of vulnerability.

The three levels are also connected with vertical, bidirectional arrows. This is meant to illustrate that co-

production at the different levels are mutually interdependent. For instance, issues raised through co-production processes at one level may evoke change or shed light on needs for change at other levels. Moreover, co-production at the different levels are also framed by different institutional settings. As such, institutional settings at superior levels may set the stage for co-production and subordinate levels (i.e. the system level may shape co-production at organizational level, and the organizational level will set the stage for co-production at the service level). Even though the levels and modes of co-production schematically are of the same sizes in the figure, it should be noted that timescales and the pace of the changes in the different levels will differ significantly.

We elaborate on and explore the applicability of the framework through the analysis of our case, and we discuss finally its broader implications. We proceed by introducing the methodology and research context of our study.

Methodology

Research context

Refugees and immigrants granted asylum in Norway have the right and are obliged to participate in an introduction program offered by the municipalities. The program is full time for five days a week and consists of 600 hours of language training and civic studies, which is provided free of charge within the first three years after settlement in the municipalities. Participants are entitled to introduction benefits granted as standard

payments, with reductions in case of invalid absence from the program.

The purpose of the program is to increase the opportunities for newly arrived refugee immigrants to participate in working and social life and to increase their financial independence. The results vary considerably across counties and municipalities. Some perform above the set target (70% employed or in education one year after introduction program), and some perform considerably below. Various studies have examined the factors that may explain the varying degrees of success across municipalities, but it is difficult to find clear answers (Djuve et al., 2017).

Our study is part of a research and development project that aims to understand how the program could be specifically improved in small, rural municipalities.

The project pursued co-production as a means for development, as well as an expected outcome. This implied that the project team invited refugees to share their experiences from participating in the introduction program, and their perceptions of local integration processes more generally. The intention was to use these experiences as a source for improving integration efforts and to develop methods for ensuring co-production in the development of future services.

Research design

The study is based on a trailing research design (Stensaker, 2013). This means that we followed (trailed) the development processes in the municipalities that aimed to improve and strengthen refugee integration. Trailing research is formative in the sense that insights derived through the research are shared with decision makers driving the development during ongoing processes. The research may in this way inform and affect the direction of the processes. The trailing research combined different research strategies and forms of data collection, which is described next.

Data collection

The study is based on different data sets: various kinds of interviews, observations, and document studies. An overview of the data collection is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Data collection overview.

	Municipal. 1	Municipal. 2	Municipal. 3	Cross-municipal.	Total
Interviews with public service representatives	7	9	5		21
Interviews with refugees	6	5	4		15
Observations of meetings and workshops	4	8	9	2	23
Individual plans	6	5	4		15
Policy documents	1	1	1	3	6

Interviews

The study is based on two kinds of interviews: interviews with managers and frontline employees in the public service system and interviews with refugees enrolled as participants in the introduction program. All interviews were semi-structured to support the open and exploratory aims of the study, and different interview guides were used to guide the conversations. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 2 hours and were mainly conducted face to face with one or two researchers present. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The interviews with managers and employees were mainly focused on understanding how the services were organized and functioning in the different municipalities, as well as what the respondents found challenging. The interviews with the refugees focused on their backgrounds, experiences with the new local community, experiences with the refugee services and other public services, suggestions for improvements to these services, experiences with engagement with third sector actors and employers, and hopes and dreams for the future.

The interviews with the refugees were conducted in Norwegian. We did not use interpreters, which may have affected the quality of the interviews as the informants may have experienced the language as a barrier to expressing themselves. We found on the other hand that conversations without interpreters allowed for a closer and more relaxed interview situation, which was important.

Observations

The data collection also involved observations of 23 meetings and workshops focusing on how to improve the introduction programs and integration processes in the municipalities. A range of actors participated in these workshops; mainly public service officials from different administrative levels and different service arenas, but also representatives from non-governmental organizations and local employers, participated in some of the meetings. One or two researchers participated as observers, and the meetings were recorded through detailed field notes that were subsequently written up as comprehensive summaries.

Document studies

Related to the interviews with refugees (participants in the introduction program), we were allowed access to

the informants' case files. More precisely, we assessed legal documents called "individual plans," which are supposed to work as a central tool for planning and dialogue between public services and their users. We have perceived and analyzed this document as a tool for co-production, thus the assessment of informants' individual plans (form and content) is a central part of the overall analysis.

The document studies also include assessments of local, regional, and national strategy and policy documents. We assessed the three municipalities' local planning documents on refugee integration and one regional policy document. We also reviewed national policy documents, specifically two documents that set the statutory guidelines for integration in the municipalities. These document studies were important for gaining an understanding of the broader policy context.

Interpretation and analysis

Our analysis is based in process data (Langley, 1999; Stensaker, 2013). This means that the data are collected in order to understand ongoing organizational processes that consist of activities, events, and sequences of events. Our study focuses on the analysis of three municipalities' development processes aimed at improving the communities' refugee integration efforts. As shown, this involved data collection that shed light on how refugee integration was handled at the outset of the development processes (interviews and document studies), and studies of the processes initiated to spur change (observations of meetings and workshops).

As discussed by Langley (1999), there are various possible "sensemaking" strategies that can be used to analyze process data, and a combination of different analytical strategies is often needed. In this article, we use a narrative strategy, and present findings as narrative descriptions of events that illustrate how co-production played out in the development project. We use this to take a meta-perspective on co-production and use the insights to develop a framework that can be used to analyze and guide co-production with vulnerable users.

Empirical findings

Our analysis shows, in sum, that the refugee immigrants in the project we studied were only directly involved as co-producers at the level of service interactions. We also found that the refugee immigrants were indirectly involved through representative co-production in development processes at the organizational level. We did not find examples of co-production addressing the system

level within the timeframes of the project, but we found that issues raised through the project (through interviews and workshops) concerned problems that would require solutions at the system level. We next present empirical examples that illustrate how these co-production processes played out in our research context.

Co-production in service interactions – direct co-production

In the introduction program for refugees in Norway, the importance of tailoring and individualization of services is emphasized in the legal act and related legal documents regulating the program. While the program contains standard elements provided to all participants, individualization has been increasingly emphasized since the program was first introduced in 2003. To ensure individual adjustments, the municipality is legally obliged to develop an individual plan for each participant. Following the introduction act, the plan should be based on a basic charting of the participants' competencies, prior knowledge, education, needs, and opportunities, and it should be developed interactively with the immigrants. It should furthermore state the participants' goals, contain timelines, and indicate measures necessary to fulfil short-term and long-term individual goals. The plan should also be regularly reviewed and adapted to the immigrants' changing plans and circumstances.

The individual plan becomes in this way a central tool for co-production in the introduction program. The individual plan should ideally serve as a dynamic document that follows the process of getting to know the refugee immigrant as well as the immigrant's development and progress through the program. The content of the plan itself should be co-produced between the immigrant and his program coordinator and provide subsequently the means for engaging the users as co-producers throughout the program period.

In our assessment of the individual plan, we found that the plans generally revealed profiles of the immigrants, including backgrounds and aims, that matched the ways they conveyed their life stories in our research interviews. Therefore, the individual plans seem to serve their intended purpose by providing a platform for developing and planning individualized programs based on background knowledge about the participants.

We found that one municipality also created a group of women to strengthen the position of participants perceived as set the furthest away from working life due to illiteracy, low educational level, and lack of work experience. The group was created to foster closer

dialogue between the services and this group of users and to gain a better understanding of the challenges they faced in the new community. Interpreters took part in the group meetings, and the fora were seen as contributing to improved communication and supporting social inclusion for this particularly marginalized group. The measure can be seen as an example of creating a structure that enables direct co-production with a user group that can otherwise be difficult to engage with.

Such extra measures can be seen as examples that strengthen co-production at the level of service interactions by making additions to the individual plan that perhaps were less relevant for users without ambitions for education or employment. However, we also found that the individual plans had various shortcomings as a means for co-production. First, to some users, the whole idea of a plan with stated goals and listed measures to get there felt somewhat out of touch with the harsh realities of a daily life marked by uncertainties and worries for the future:

You Norwegians, you go through a plan—you have problems that you can solve—while we are in an establishment phase—we do not know what is happening. It is all about putting out fires and you just need to deal with the fires. When you have many problems, you cannot choose all that much or make so many plans. It is difficult.¹

The interviews with the immigrants also revealed that some were not familiar with the fact that they were supposed to have a plan, and often they could not recall what they had put down as their main goals. Lack of ownership and understanding of the plan among the participants was also an issue recognized by the frontline employees:

We [had] a lot of text that none of our participants were able to read. They do not know what it is.²

When assessing the plans, we also found that the stated goals at times were so diffuse and general that they could hardly be used for developing tailored programs. Goals could for instance, be phrased as “Find a job and learn the language.” It consequently became difficult to define concrete measures that could help achieve these diffuse goals.

So, on one hand, the individual plans were inadequate as a means for co-production because they were too text-based and detailed, which made them inaccessible for illiterates or those who did not know the language. On the other hand, the plans that lacked extensive descriptions were not useful to guide either the introduction program participants or the coordination of services in the development of a tailored program.

To improve the quality of the individual plans, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) developed national templates for the municipalities to use. Below is a screenshot of one of many pages of the national template (the full template covers 12 pages).

The municipalities in our study did not use these national templates but had developed their own forms based on inspiration from other municipalities (all three municipalities had different templates). These templates, based in MS Word, were problematic to use dynamically with regular updates. On one hand, in cases in which the individual plan was used actively with regular updates, it was hard to obtain an overview of the participants’ situations because it was necessary to scroll through lengthy documents. On the other hand, if the plan lacked detailed descriptions and regular updates, it was easy to gain an overview, but then the document was not informative and was of limited use to guide the services.

Thus, the individual plan was used in the introduction program in ways that enabled direct co-production with users at the level of service interactions, but we also found that there were challenges related to the design of the plan that hampered co-production. The challenges were linked to the dual role of the plan: it served on one hand bureaucratic and administrative purposes, while it was meant to be a tool for the participants to plan for their new life at the same time. The bureaucratic aspects of the plan made it unsuited for the latter purpose, and the participants seemed to feel distanced from their own plans. They lacked ownership because the plans were written in Norwegian and due the administrative and bureaucratic format.

Co-production at organizational levels – representative co-production

The challenges related to the individual plan that were identified through our research were presented to employees and managers in the municipalities at an early stage of the project. Consequently, the refugee services in one of the municipalities redesigned the template for the plan to make it more dynamic and suitable for follow-up with participants. We see these changes as examples of representative co-production at the organizational level.

The new template integrated more visual elements that could better support communication with users who were illiterate and/or had limited knowledge of the Norwegian language. The new template could enable users to take a more participatory role in the development of their own plans. The renewal of the template was based on inspiration from creative work in a municipality in a neighbouring region, which resulted in an outline for alternative designs of the plan.³ The

new template was shared through the website of the Directorate of integration and diversity (IMDi), which enabled other municipalities to download the template and rethink how they could work with the individual plan. The alternative design was shared alongside guidance for how alternative designs of the plan could support closer dialogues with participants as goals, measures, or activities could be discussed through drawings in combination with text. An illustration of the alternative template is provided in Figure 3.

The example shows how insights into users' limited awareness and ownership of the individual plan was used as a basis for changing the template to make it more suitable for communicating and planning the program with participants. The users' individual plans were in the standard format (Figure 2), integrated with the needs for legal-administrative documentation of the participant cases. Thus, it was more supportive of bureaucratic processes rather than facilitating meaningful communication and interaction with the users. In the changed design, these two aspects of the plan were separated so that the front page was the part of the document that the users could mainly relate to. Needs for programs that could support a digital version of the

plan that would be easier to edit and update were also discussed.

This example is illustrative of co-production at the organizational level as the users' voices and perspectives are included in efforts to develop and improve existing services in the introduction programs within the municipalities. Thus, the case deals with a kind of co-production that takes place beyond service interactions and beyond user involvement in individual cases. At the same time, we find that the changes are brought about through representative co-production as the voices and perspectives of the immigrants are mediated through the researchers' interviews and document studies.

We also found examples in which fora were created to discuss the potential for change and improvement in the services at the organizational level across public service agencies. Such fora were created as workshops and meetings as part of the project we studied, but in one municipality, they also created one such forum in a more permanent structure beyond the project period. However, the interests and voices of the refugee immigrants were merely present through representatives, i.e., through researchers and the presentations of findings from research interviews or through frontline employees

4. MÅL MED INTRODUKSJONSPROGRAMMET

Hovedmål

Deltakerens langsiktige mål (arbeid og utdanning)
Det langsiktige målet kan gjennomføres utenfor rammene/kan oppnås etter at introduksjonsprogrammet er avsluttet. (Kan oppføre flere alternative mål).

Deltakerens hovedmål med introduksjonsprogrammet
(Hva skal deltaker oppnå i løpet av programmet?)

Delmål i introduksjonsprogrammet

Eksempler: Få erfaring/tilegne meg ferdigheter innenfor en bestemt bransje, få arbeidserfaring, bestå fag fra grunnskoleopplæring, bestå fag/opplæring på videregående nivå, få vurdert medbrakte kompetanse, gjennomføre komplementerende høyere utdanning, få etablert nettverk i en frivillig organisasjon, nettverk, etc.

Beskrivelse av delmål:	F.o.m. – t.o.m.	Ansvarlig enhet/virksomhet:	Vurdering av måloppnåelse:

(For å tilføye flere rader: Sett markør utenfor feltet nederst til høyre og trykk på «enter».)

Figure 2. Screenshot of the national template for an individual plan in the introduction program. Though the text is in Norwegian, it has been included to illustrate the legal-administrative format of the plan.

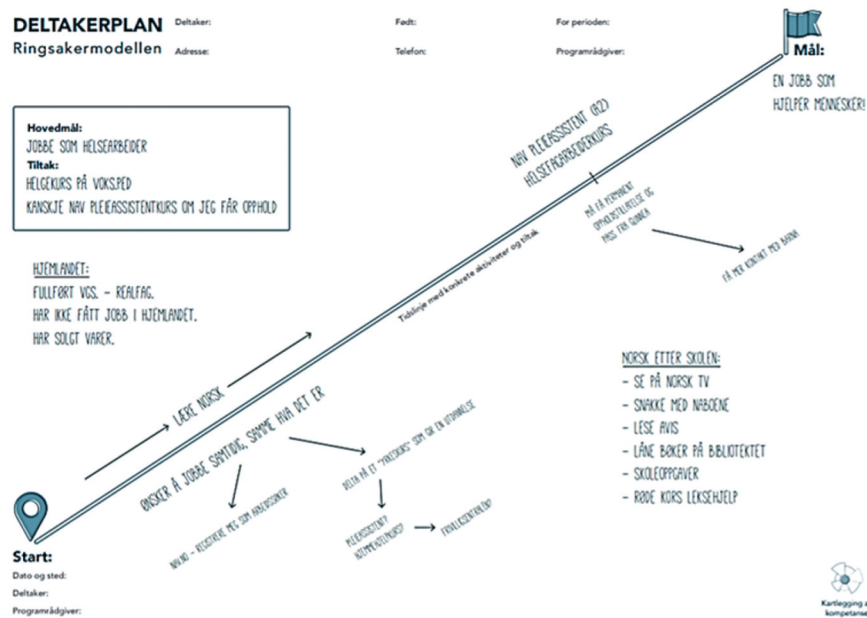


Figure 3. Illustration of alternative designs for individual plans. While the text is in Norwegian, the illustration is included to illustrate the difference between this alternative and the standard format shown in Figure 2.

who retold the stories and situations of the users. Typically, the fora took complex cases that they struggled with in the municipal services as points of departure for discussions of possible solutions, and for spurring broader and more principled debates on needs for changes in the service system. Thus, in co-production at the organizational level, the refugee immigrants were only indirectly involved through representative co-production.

Co-production at the system level

Co-production at the system level corresponds to what Strokosch and Osborne (2016) refer to as “enhanced co-production.” This implies processes of co-design and co-creation of innovation, which may fundamentally transform or recreate public services. This obviously happens more rarely than co-production at the organizational level, which is about modifying and developing existing services. The introduction program examined in our research is a program that all municipalities are obliged to offer, but the municipalities have considerable flexibility to develop and organize programs that are best suited to their local contexts and needs. Therefore, a certain room for adaption and innovation is available within the municipalities (e.g., the example of templates for the individual plan), while other aspects require changes in, for instance, rules, regulations, funding schemes, and systems for settling refugees regulated at a national level.

The introduction program is regulated in the Introduction Act, introduced in 2003, and it has been

the subject of several evaluations and commissioned research projects. This has generated knowledge on needs for improvements and adjustments that has been reflected in green papers and white papers and which has subsequently led to changes in the law and thus the overall structure of the program. The law has, for instance, moved in the direction of increased emphasis on individual adjustments for participants and increased focus on work-related teaching and activities. Including the perspectives and voices of the users has been central in research on the introduction programs (see, for instance, Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Djuve et al., 2017). Thus, the national system regulating the introduction programs in the municipalities can be seen as gradually transformed over the years through representative co-production in which researchers and research reports have represented the voices of the participants.

However, the project of our study did not result in examples of enhanced co-production. Still, central problems of refugee integration raised through the project, such as unreliable and limited public transport and scarce access to higher education in rural areas, require action at the national or system levels, or at least beyond the boundaries of singular municipalities.

Concluding discussion

As stated in the introduction, we aimed in this paper to outline a framework for analyzing enabling and constraining conditions for co-production of services with vulnerable users. This kind of framework is needed

because, while there exists a comprehensive conceptual literature on co-production and co-creation (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Verschuere et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015), the literature is largely generic and does not consider that users' prerequisites to co-produce differ significantly. Thus, frameworks and models that are sensitive to how vulnerable users in various ways meet constraints and barriers for participation is called for (Donetto et al., 2015; Morrison & Dearden, 2013). However, while being aware of how vulnerability can involve various constraints and barriers to participation is important, it may also overshadow the fact that vulnerable user groups possess valuable resources enabling co-production. Thus, our framework offers a new way of looking at co-production as contingent on both the constraints and capabilities, or resources of the users. Moreover, while previous research has shown the importance of adopting "sensitizing" approaches when involving vulnerable users (Dietrich et al., 2017), our framework suggests ways to lift the gaze and consider strategies for co-production at different levels and in different forms.

To briefly reiterate the findings from our study, we found that direct forms of co-production were visible at the level of service interactions, and we found examples of representative co-production at the organizational level that contributed to bringing about change in existing systems of the introduction program. At the same time, we did not find examples of co-production that addressed the system level, even though the project raised problems related to local integration efforts that required changes or solutions at the system level. We have visualized our

findings with reference to the framework in Figure 4, showed below. The shaded fields in the framework show the forms and levels of co-production covered in our study.

As suggested in the framework, co-production processes are conditioned by perceived constraints and capabilities linked to different forms of vulnerability. Analysis and experiences from co-production processes may in turn inform and provide new insights on the conditions for co-production as related to different forms of vulnerability. We discuss next how this applies to our analysis.

Co-production of services with refugee immigrants is clearly conditioned by language barriers that may constrain communication and the active involvement of users in their individual cases, as well as in development processes that seek to find ways to change or improve services at the organizational level or broader system level. We find that language barriers relate to constraints that refugee immigrants face when they do not know the national language of the new country. This limits their ability to express themselves and communicate on issues regarding their individual cases or in broader co-production processes. However, language barriers may also concern more complex and deep-rooted barriers related to what Morrison and Dearden (2013) refer to as the "language games" underpinning public service systems. Such language games may set implicit rules that guide the ways in which involvement in participative processes are expected to take place. Mastering these rules thus requires competence and insight on how the

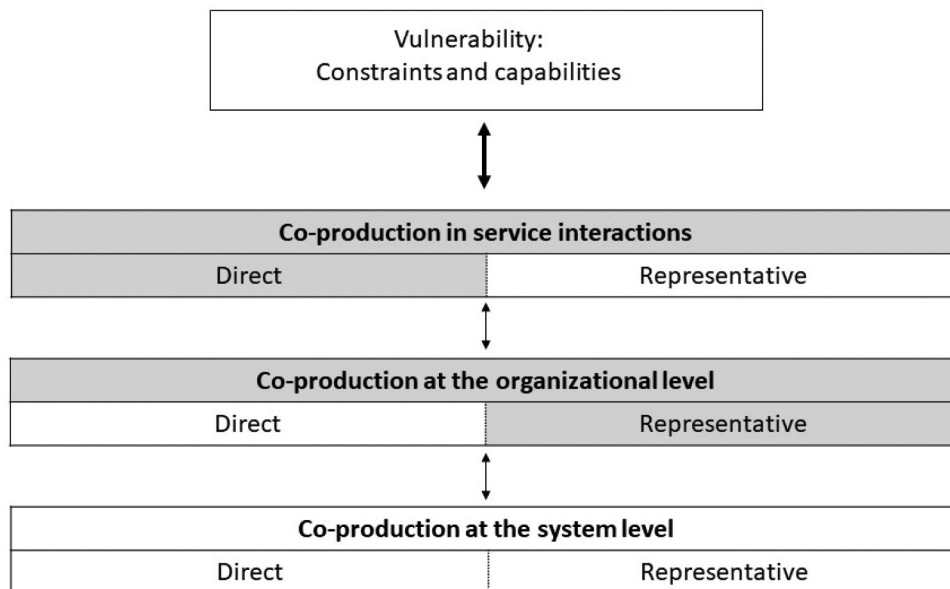


Figure 4. Framework for analyzing co-production with vulnerable users.

system works and this is a kind of cultural competence that can take time to acquire for refugee immigrants.

Our research does not bring specific insights into how language games shape co-production processes, but we see them expressed to a certain extent in the standard format of the individual plans (see Figure 2), which has a design that supports more bureaucratic purposes than it facilitates communication and involvement of the users. We also found that the users were only involved indirectly through representatives at the organizational level, which may indicate that the refugee immigrants are assumed to have insufficient understanding of how the systems work. As shown in our project, fora were created to talk about the refugee immigrants with the aim of improving services among actors within the service systems. At the same time, these fora excluded the direct voices of refugee immigrants, i.e., there were no fora created for talking *with* the users. Hence, we have shown how the framework can help identify blind spots in the way vulnerable users are engaged, or fail to be engaged, which may spur reflections and discussions on how to do things differently.

The framework may in this way be helpful as a heuristic tool for researchers and practitioners working with co-production. It captures and articulates the ways in which vulnerable users can be granted more or less active roles in co-production processes and we highlight the need to reflect on which strategies are suitable. Co-producing with vulnerable users may involve various constraints that make representative co-production necessary since certain groups can be prevented from voicing their needs and preferences directly. At the same time, representative co-production can also be used in ways that prevent certain groups from having a more direct voice because they are assumed to belong to “vulnerable” groups that are not fully capable of co-production.

While our analysis may spur reflections for practice and enable further research dialogues on co-production with vulnerable users, it is not without limitations. We have not paid explicit attention to the fact that our study is set in a service context where users lack legal status as citizens, which limits their access to influence policies and political decisions through the formal channels of elections. Citizenship, or non-citizenship, and its implications for co-production could have been highlighted and reflected on, as a follow-up to discussions raised in previous studies (Stougaard, 2020; Strokosch & Osborne, 2016). In service contexts where service users have limited access to influence political decisions through formal channels, co-production become especially important, but also complex and problematic. These

issues deserves more careful research attention, and we hope this paper offers some directions to further research in this field.

Notes

1. This quote has been translated from Norwegian by the authors.
2. This quote has been translated from Norwegian by the authors.
3. <https://www.imdi.no/introduksjonsprogram/kartlegging-og-individuell-plan/slik-lager-du-individuell-plan/>

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