



# Co-creation as solution for a sustainable welfare state? Challenges for the welfare professions

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## Abstract

One of the main strategies to solve the sustainability challenges of the welfare state is to involve the service users, their next of kin, volunteers and citizens in general as co-creators of care and welfare. This article focuses on two questions: Firstly, in what ways could co-creation be seen as a strategy contributing to preserving the sustainability of the welfare state? Secondly: what consequences could the co-creation discourse have for professionals in the health and care sector? What should be the professionals' role, what kind of competence will be important, and what challenges and dilemmas must the welfare professions relate to? The article has Norway and the Norwegian welfare state as its empirical case.

## Keywords

welfare state, sustainability, professionals, co-creation, division of labour

## Introduction

Across Europe there is a growing concern about the sustainability of the welfare state. The debate has accelerated in the last decades, and one main reason is demographic changes, where more people are getting older, with a growing need for care services. At the same time, there will be fewer people to take care of them (Greve, 2018). From the public authorities, one of the main strategies to meet these challenges is to involve the services users, their next of kin, volunteers and citizens in general as co-producers or co-creators of care and welfare.<sup>1</sup>

Neither sustainability nor co-creation are unambiguous concepts. After its breakthrough in the Brundtland report in 1987 (WCED, 1987), the concept of sustainability is increasingly criticised for being too flexible and ambiguous, and that it can legitimate policies pointing in different directions (Brown, 2016; Parr, 2009). In a similar way, reviews show that different arguments are used for justifying co-creation (Agger & Tortzen, 2015; Voorberg et al., 2015). In policy documents, the term is first seen as a strategy to make

the services more effective, both in terms of labour power and public expenses to welfare. Furthermore, it is argued that co-creation between the welfare professionals and other actors will make the services qualitatively better and more democratic by strengthening citizens' influence.

This article will focus on two questions: Firstly, in what ways could co-creation be seen as a strategy contributing to preserve the sustainability of the welfare state? Based on reviews of literature and policy documents, the first part of the article accounts broadly for how the terms are applied and discussed, and what different solutions they present for the welfare state and the welfare services.

With this discussion as a frame, the article raises the second question, which so far has received limited attention: What consequences could the co-creation discourse have for the welfare professionals? The focus will be on professional work in the health and care services. For example: What should be healthcare professionals' role? What kind of competence will be important and what challenges and dilemmas must the professionals relate to? How we answer the questions will largely depend on how co-creation is interpreted on the policy level, and which interpretations get to set the agenda and dominate the political debate.

The article has Norway and the Norwegian welfare state as its empirical case, but sustainability challenges are today subject to increasing attention and discussions across nations and within different welfare state models (European Commission, 2019; Greve, 2018).

### **Increasing sustainability challenges in the welfare state**

In his novel *Death with Interruptions*, the Portuguese Nobel Prize literature laureate, José Saramago (2008), portrays an unnamed country where people stop dying. Initially, the inhabitants celebrate this apparent victory over mankind's longtime foe. However, the joy is short-lived. Soon, unique demographic and financial challenges become evident. Even if they do not die, people still get fragile and incapacitated as they grow older. The complete cessation of dying leads to a growing fear among healthcare workers that the system will collapse under its own weight: generations of incapacitated but still living people will populate care homes and hospitals for, presumably, all eternity. A means of finally letting people die and relieving families of the burden, is devised and implemented by an underground group known as the maphia. The incapacitated are brought over the border to another country where they instantly die, as people have not stopped dying elsewhere on the globe. The industry develops so quickly that the government itself becomes beholden to the maphioso, even bringing it to the brink of war with its neighbours.

Even though we will probably never end up with a society like the one portrayed in Saramago's novel, we cannot escape the fact that the population is growing older at an increasing pace. While this in most ways is seen as positive and as a result of better living conditions, better health in the population and improved health and care services, it is a

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1. Co-production is developed in the area public administration and has its origin in the public sector, while co-creation has its origin in the private sector (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Voorberg et al., 2015). In the public sector, co-creation is increasingly used to show how users, together with services, contribute to meet users' needs, and in this way create individual value for them. In both the theoretical literature and empirical studies, the definitions of the terms today to a large extent overlap. (Voorberg et al., 2015). In this article, co-creation is used as the general term, except when co-production is used in the referred literature.

fact that old people are also more fragile and sicker than younger people and increasingly will need more health and care services.

While it is this “aging tsunami” that has received the most attention in the welfare policy debate (Barusch, 2013), policy documents also point to an increasing need for assistance and services to a growing number of disabled younger persons with a comprehensive spectrum of health and social problems, and which make the future challenges even bigger. The number of users under 67 in Norwegian municipal care services was doubled in the decade from 1996 to 2006 (St. meld. nr. 25, 2005–2006).

Much of the debate has focused on the economic consequences of the development and how it threatens the economic sustainability of the welfare state, prompting the question of whether we can afford public welfare services at such a generous level as we have today. The development raises discussions about how to organise and develop services in more innovative and creative ways to uphold the level of welfare services (Greve, 2018).

At the same time as we get these economic challenges, there will be fewer people to take care of those in need of care. A recent Norwegian public report states that in no other sectors has the increase of employees been so high in the latest decades as in the health and care services. The number of employees tripled from the 1970s to 2021 (NOU 2023: 4). Still, prognoses estimate an increased need for employees in the municipal health and care services to 30 percent in the decade from 2021 to 2031 (Meld. St. 14 (2022–2023)). The report argues that the growing need for personnel caused by the increasing aging population is not sustainable. It concludes that independently of the economic space for action, the supply of personnel is what will limit the development of the services and hinder them to grow further in their current form. “We cannot man ourselves out of the challenges” (NOU 2023: 4, p. 15), the report concludes.

## **Co-creation as solution to the sustainability challenges**

Co-creation and co-production are terms that are increasingly used to characterise the welfare policy (Steen et al., 2018; Needham & Glasby, 2014). Originally the terms were attached to the cooperation between the service employees and the service users, but later definitions include family members, volunteers, and actors in the civil society (Pestoff, 2012). They are seen as citizens with resources and competence that are complementary to the professionals, and consequently as important partners in welfare production.

The co-creation discourse is further characterised by clearly stated expectations of activity and responsibility from the citizens (Martin, 2009). The individual responsibility for one’s own health and welfare is emphasised, but also a responsibility for the citizens to be active participants in the community they are part of. The fundamental understanding of the service users changes, from passive recipients of services to active and responsible partners. The active, participating, responsible individual represents the ideal that welfare policy and welfare services should aim to realise (Sivesind & Saglie, 2017). “Active citizenship” has become an established term to describe this “new face of welfare” (Jensen, & Pfau-Effinger, 2005). Active citizenship is related to different services and increasingly to services in the long-term care sector (Eggers et al., 2019; Eggers, 2022).

## **Sustainability, co-creation and active citizenship – diffuse concepts**

Sustainability, co-creation and active citizenship can all be designated as what Pollit and Hupe (2011) call “magic concepts”. They are characterised by a high degree of abstraction,

a strongly positive normative charge, a seeming ability to dissolve previous dilemmas and binary oppositions and mobility across domains (p. 641).

The basic meaning of sustainability is that something can endure or be sustained indefinitely (Johnston et al., 2007, p. 61), but the most well-known definition is from the Brundtland report, where *sustainable development* is “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987:43). This is also where the concept got its breakthrough, before it spread to other areas, including welfare and the debate about how to sustain the welfare state. Because the content of the concept is so flexible and ambiguous it can be related to different phenomena, domains and processes (Brown, 2016; Parr, 2009). In the welfare area, critics claim that the term could be connected to neo-liberal reforms with the intention to dismantle public welfare services just as well as to preserve a strong welfare state and strengthening marginalised groups’ position in society (Holford, 2016).

Breimo and Røiseland (2021) state that co-creation and co-production primarily are terms used in superior policy documents. Here the concepts generally have a positive, normative value, and are presented as democratic and empowering: the involvement of users and citizens means that they are taken seriously and should have the right to stronger influence in the future creation of welfare services. They are seen as having resources and competence that contribute to making services better and more adapted to individuals’ needs and interests.

However, more critical studies conclude that while the concepts have achieved a hegemonic position, the content appears ambiguous and unclear. Based on a literature review about co-creation, Agger and Tortzen (2015) point out two different meanings of the concept which operate side by side: an empowerment or democracy approach, and an efficiency approach. Tortzen (2019) describes the ambiguity as “the Janus face of co-creation”. On the one side, the concept emphasises the democratic intentions and empowerment potential based on mutual cooperation across actors and sectors. On the other, it signifies a neo-liberal approach of privatisation and downsizing of public responsibility for welfare, where responsibility instead is handed over to families, volunteers, and civil society. Despite the participatory ambitions of this approach, it could legitimise politics and measures that make health and well-being an individual responsibility, and increase inequality in health and living conditions between people (Heimburg & Ness, 2021). Steen et al. (2018) characterise this tendency as the “dark side” of co-creation.

From the policy documents alone, it can be difficult to translate co-creation and co-production into practical terms with concrete effects. Voorberg et al. (2015) conclude that so far, research has to a little degree been concerned with the results or effects of co-creation, but rather with what are seen as important factors to promote co-creation and with developing typologies of different kinds of co-creation.

Literature reviews conclude that there is little evidence that the positive ideological goals have resulted in lasting changes in the ways the public services and the citizens cooperate, or that the barriers between the public services and the citizens have changed (Agger & Tortzen, 2015; Rønning & Andfossen, 2021). Possible causes referred to are organisational structures - that the cooperation process takes place within existing organisational frameworks and institutionalised practices - different cultures, contradictory paradigms, and what is seen as valid and valuable knowledge (Bager et al., 2021). Fledderus et al. (2015) claim that involving service users and other actors in a co-creation process create uncertainty in the public organisations, and that their attitude therefore is ambiguous. Organisations that are dependent on the government have the disposition

to adapt to bureaucratic forms of control which might be distracted by values that are delivered from the users through co-creation but are difficult to measure.

Tummers et al. (2009) use the term “policy alienation” to describe when professionals experience a lack of identification with policy programmes they are expected to implement, and their alienation not only influences the effectiveness of the policy, but also the quality of interaction between the professionals and citizens.

Like sustainability and co-creation, active citizenship has primarily been a concept concerned with the policy level (Eggers et al., 2019; Eggers, 2022). The call for active citizenship has come from both above and below and includes conservative and radical standpoints (Hvinden & Johansson, 2007). There has been less focus on the implications of the term, and what challenges it could represent when organising the services and practicing it.

For instance, the optimistic policy documents do not seem to take into account that old people are a diverse group. While we have a growing generation of old people with resources and good health and where we can expect activity and responsibility, we will at the same time get an increasing group of very old people with need of comprehensive care services. In some ways, we can talk about two generations of old people. Norwegian statistics show that in 2040, the number of people over 80 is expected to double compared to today (Meld. St. 14 (2022–2023)), and accordingly, the number of people with dementia is estimated to double in the period from 2020 to 2040 (NOU 2020: 15).

Empirical studies also show that even if the professionals agree with the policy goals of activation and responsabilisation, they experience severe challenges and dilemmas when trying to implement the principles in practice. This is due both to users’ health conditions, contextual and structural barriers, and limited resources in the services (Askheim, 2020). Førland et al. (2021) describe it as “simultaneity dilemmas”. At the same time that professionals should use more resources on cooperation with other actors in co-creative interventions, activation and preventive measures, they are obliged to give necessary services to all those who are dependent on daily support and acute interventions.

The assumption that the user always wants to take responsibility and be active in service production should also be an issue of discussion (Andersen, 2020). There are situations where expectations and pressures for activation could lead to the disempowerment instead of the empowerment of the user. Users could experience pressure to accept solutions that professionals propose, at the same time that the professionals’ perception is that the users take part voluntarily. For instance, there might be situations where users consciously prefer a passive role, even if they have the possibility to have influence over the services. In this way, they can end up in a role that Andersen (2019, p. 5) characterises as a “forced co-producer”.

Eggers et al. (2019) warn against an activation policy that is not followed by generous funding by the welfare state. These policies tend to differ between two types of active citizenship: on the one hand, a self-determination type, where the state plays a major role and underpins the promotion of the self-responsibility of active social citizens by offering them generous funding or support for the organisation or provision of their social services. In turn, this will promote the active social citizen in terms of autonomy. On the other, a self-reliance type, where the policy is linked to a minor role of the state which rather forces active social citizens directly or indirectly to be self-reliant in financing their own social security and social services, especially when some citizens are excluded from comprehensive welfare state provisions. Like co-creation, active citizenship in other words appears with a “Janus face”.

## Co-production and co-creation in Norwegian welfare policy

Since the mid-1980s, coordination and cooperation across disciplines and sectors in the welfare state has been an important policy goal in most Western countries, including Norway (NOU 1986: 4). In 2006, the 6 year research and development programme HUSK (The Norwegian abbreviation of “The University Research Programme to Support Selected Municipal Social Research and Development”) was launched and financed by the National directorate of health and social affairs. The main objective was to develop new and binding cooperative relations between research, educational institutions, practice and users of the social services. Four equal partners participated in the project: academics, students, service users and practitioners (Austin & Johannessen, 2015).

Important lessons from the projects were a renewed attention to the importance of dialogue within the context of bureaucratic encounters, sharing the design and delivery of social services with service users and sharing the research enterprise by incorporating the perspective of service users. Still, a main conclusion from the project was that the researchers with a traditional view on research largely controlled the project (Gjernes & Bliksvær, 2011). The user representatives took part, but their influence was limited and their role unclear.

The terms used in early policy documents and the HUSK project were coordination, cooperation and partnership. The terms co-production and co-creation got its breakthrough in Norway with the public report “Innovation in care” (NOU 2011: 11), where the terms were seen as fundamental means in the production of welfare. Co-creation is presented as a term where new relations are created between the service users, relatives, employees in the welfare services, volunteer organisations and the civil and local community.

Co-creation in this connection represents a movement away from a receiver and consumer perspective to a citizen perspective, where people’s daily lives and aspirations, needs and goals are taken seriously and seen as fundamental for the development of services. (p. 57)

The emphasis on co-creation is taken further in later policy documents on health and welfare, with broad political support (Askheim et al., 2017). In the government’s latest white paper on aging, a main message is that efforts in welfare should be turned towards new areas like co-creation and activation (Meld. St. 24 (2022–2023), p.7).

Reviews of the policy documents show how the perceptions of the service users and their needs have changed, both in the descriptions of assistance and interventions and how the challenges are understood and described (Askheim et al., 2017; Christensen & Fluge, 2016). The elderly of today and tomorrow are described as more resourceful, and we should expect that they, to a greater degree than earlier generations, can handle and take care of the challenges old age represents. A main task is therefore to mobilise the individual’s resources in the production of services. In the balance between rights and duties, the care policy puts stronger emphasis on users’ obligations and responsibilities. In this way, the documents present the aging population not only as a problem, but also as an opportunity for innovation and new solutions.

The users’ next of kin are identified as important actors in the co-creation strategy, and both their competence and the efforts they already perform are valued (NOU 2011: 11; Meld. St. 29, 2012–2013). Future welfare services should therefore cooperate in a way that

recognizes the next of kin and their experiences and efforts, without exploiting them. New policies should include more support and guidance, and better economic support, but the policy documents also point to the next of kin's responsibilities. Since the number of users of welfare services will increase and include persons of all ages and with different and composed needs, this will place stronger demands on families and society at large (Meld. St. 24, 2015–2016).

The importance of engaging more volunteers in the care sector is further highlighted. Ideal voluntary organisations are described as innovators who step in where the welfare state has failed. The responsibility for being an active participant in society is expressed as participation in volunteer organisations, cooperative efforts, charity organisations, user organisations and more informal efforts in the local community, family and social networks (NOU 2011: 11).

The new policy represents a change in how the authorities perceive the responsibility of the welfare state and how to preserve it. While no political parties in Norway are spokespersons for dismantling the welfare state in a neo-liberal manner (Hatland, 2023), there has been a gradual shift from promises of provisions and insurance of a safe, public care service to an increasing focus on the individual's responsibility and obligation for one's own health and old age (Christensen & Fluge, 2016). The cultural model of the welfare state has changed from a strong accentuation of the importance of continuing expansion to realise its universal goals, to an image of a fragile and overloaded welfare state, where its sustainability is threatened.

Involving the next of kin in co-creation processes encounters conflicting considerations in practice. Family members already contribute considerably with about the same amount of care work as the municipal employees (Holmøy et al., 2014). They often experience a too extensive care burden which makes them worn out (Jenhaug, 2020; Skarli, 2022). Because of their burdens, they also struggle with their own health. They experience not being listened to by the service providers. They report difficulties in getting sufficient services and having to fight hard in their roles as advocates for their family members. Critics fear that the increasing expectations to the involvement from the users' next of kin will lead to a shift in the responsibility for welfare, back to families (van Houdt et al., 2011). Since the expectations are gendered (Breimo, 2014), the critics fear that the development will impact women the most, pushing them out of the paid workforce. The tendency has also been criticised from a class perspective, where there are warnings that elderly people with weak personal finances will increasingly be dependent on help and care from their next of kin, while more wealthy individuals will be able to buy private services (Vabø & Szebehely, 2012; Katzin, 2014).

The optimistic potential of involving volunteers is likewise disputed. Andfossen (2019) reminds us that there is a considerable overlap between unpaid individual care performed by family members and what is characterised by volunteer work. The number of organised volunteers in the welfare area is much lower, and there are few signs of improved recruitment of volunteers to the welfare area (Skinner et al., 2019). A survey among municipal employees in the care sector showed that a lack of supply of volunteers was seen as the foremost barrier to establishing good cooperation between the municipal services and volunteers (Lorentzen & Skinner, 2019). Andfossen (2021) also reminds us that if care services increasingly recruit volunteers to welfare services, it might create increased public value, but for volunteer organisations, who are dependent on the same resources (the individuals), it will represent a loss of value.

The conclusion, therefore, must be that co-production and co-creation, as the terms appear in Norwegian welfare policy, illustrate and reflect the same ambiguity and raises the same discussions, dilemmas and challenges as shown in the previous section.

## **Welfare professions as co-creators?**

In the Norwegian government's plan for the care services, Care Plan 2020, the government states that "the care services of tomorrow must be designed and developed together with users, patients and close family members in cooperation with volunteers, non-profit organisations and private organisations, and they must be founded on sound expertise, effective management and multidisciplinary cooperation" (Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2015, p. 1).

One main question following from such a conclusion would be: what should sound expertise, and the ability to exercise effective management and multidisciplinary cooperation, imply for professionals?

Møller Mortensen (2022) has launched the concept "professional co-producers" to describe a new role for professionals. A task of increasing importance could be to act as organisers and coordinators of the co-creation work. It should include initiatives in capacity building, and taking on roles to initiate joint actions among citizens, stakeholders and sectors (Heimburg & Ness, 2021). Hupe and Hill (2007) state that street level work in organisations and networks increasingly is characterised by vertical relations and calls for "multiple accountability". It could be accountability to colleagues in teams, partners from other sectors and other actors. Ingold (2018) has introduced the term "boundary spanning" as a task of increasing importance for the professionals. These are individuals that are qualified to build bridges between different interests, professionals, organisations and other actors. They should be able to overcome tensions between the actors, and make cooperation and partnership work.

Ansell et al. (2022) argue that co-creation processes must be led, and that leadership and management is decisive for their success. But it should be another kind of leadership than the traditional top-down thinking. They describe the management instead as horizontal, distributive, and relational, and the professionals are described as entrepreneurs, conveners, facilitators and change makers. They might have different roles in the co-creation process, both when it comes to initiation, design and implementation. Not least, the authors underscore the importance of strengthening weak, vulnerable, and inexperienced groups. More concretely, Natland and Hansen (2017) describe important skills as clarifying the purpose of the cooperation and the roles of the actors, searching for feedback, responding to feelings, indirect communication, refinement of activities versus shared goals, and tasks as critical for successful processes that in turn lead to positive outcomes.

In practice, a professional co-producer role would be to coordinate and lead co-creative processes together with the users, their next of kin and volunteers. It is for instance stated that a primary task for the home-based care services in cooperation with families, friends and neighbours is to establish a safety net for old people living at home (Magnussen et al., 2023). This will make them safer and able to stay longer in their homes, but to assure success, such efforts must be led and coordinated in a way, where professionals listen and manoeuvre reflectively between mutual and opposing interests among the actors.

Volunteer efforts in the care sector are still modest, and important explanations seem to be: coordination problems, unclarified distribution of tasks, lack of communication, and



weak flow of information between services and volunteers (Lorentzen & Skinner, 2019). There is confusion regarding who could do practical tasks like transportation, toilet visits, dressing, meals, and similar. Such tasks are handled in different ways, and the interface between civil and professional efforts is unclear.

Not least, the role of professional co-producers should imply the ability to reflect critically on what co-creation policy might imply in practice. How should it be framed to encourage and support stronger citizen empowerment and collective responsibility? How could it oppose and resist a consumerist welfare policy that threatens a strong welfare state and where professionals in practice might end up in the role as “useful idiots” by pushing more responsibility over to the users, their next of kin and volunteers? A weighty objection against co-creation is that the concept does not include a discussion of power in the production of welfare. Co-creation processes are based on a consensus perspective where the actors are seen as having common interests in making good, holistic services (Barnes et al., 2007). Willumsen and Sirnes (2018) argue that if co-creation processes take place without analyses of possible conflicts, power structures and ethical dilemmas, there is a danger that values like human rights, democracy and personal integrity are not taken sufficiently care of. They point out that co-creation might entail tensions between opposing interests which welfare workers must decide on.

Heimburg and Ness (2021) argue that a transition to co-creative processes in health policy and practice must imply a move from a biomedical perspective towards the context of everyday life, linked to human diversity and human rights. They argue that a prerequisite for such a transition is that co-creation promotes solutions that lead to fairness and equitable outcomes. Studies show that citizens with higher socioeconomic status tend to participate more in co-creational processes than citizens further down the socioeconomic ladder. People in vulnerable positions are involved late in co-creation processes, and are often kept in vulnerable positions by professionals (Müller & Stougaard, 2022).

Heimburg and Ness (2021) link a democratic model of co-creation to Nancy Fraser’s theory of social justice and her concept of “participatory parity” (Fraser, 2009). Fraser primarily saw participatory parity along two intertwined axes: “redistribution” (i.e. economic justice) and “recognition” (i.e. cultural justice). Later, she included the concept of “representation”, arguing that justice also involves a political dimension. According to Fraser, maldistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation are unfair for the same reason: they involve a breach of the norm of participation on equal terms. In addition to Fraser’s three Rs, Heimburg and Ness (2021) propose a fourth R: relationships. They refer to research that suggests that human relationships are the most vital of all social determinants for achieving health and well-being.

There are also approaches that challenge the consensus model of co-creation. Needham and Carr (2009) make a distinction between co-production as description, as recognition and as transformation. On the lowest level (description), co-production is only an admission that existing approaches to public services in practice represent co-production. On the middle level (recognition), co-production is seen as a tool for recognising the resources and contributions users and their next of kin contribute within service production, in order to make them better and more sustainable, but without consequences for how the services are delivered and managed. The transformative level represents a shift of power relations in service production, where users are seen as equal experts and where the power of users is made stronger in the planning, management and implementation of services. For professionals, an important challenge will be how they could instigate and coordinate co-creative arrangements with transformative consequences.

## New divisions of labour?

The co-creation discourse and the request for new roles, new tasks, new challenges and varied competence in welfare services also raises the question of recruiting other kinds of employees with relevant competence into the welfare sector. In the previously mentioned white paper on care policy, it is stated that the basis for good health primarily is created outside the health and care sector (Meld. St. 24 (2022–2023): 12). Following similar lines, Beresford and Slasberg (2023) point out that we should distinguish between social care and health care:

Social care is almost certainly the public policy that comes closest to addressing the key issue of how we look after each other in twenty-first century society. Health care is perhaps a much better-known area of social policy, but it has long been medicalised and tends to be thought of much more in terms of calling in experts, in the event of illness, injury or accident, rather than taking care of our routine and daily needs. (p. 1)

The Norwegian public report, “Time for action” (NOU 2023: 4), claims that the scarcity of personnel we are facing in the care sector will imply distributing tasks to personnel where professional competence in health and care is not necessarily needed, or that other kinds of competence in a better way could cover the needs. The commission leader behind the report argues that rigid structures and in-fighting between the professions hinder achieving the best competence and capacity in the welfare sector (Bing-Jonsson & Bowin, 2023). A discussion of how the different tasks are distributed among the welfare professions and between welfare professionals, other professions and non-professionals is seen as important to secure good services for the whole population.

To make the care services more sustainable in the future, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) has been actively occupied with implementing a better and more targeted division of labour (KS, 2022). The association stresses that professional competence must be used where it is most urgent, and claims that nurses and skilled health workers today spend a lot of time doing tasks where their special competence is not necessary. Some municipalities, together with their employees in the welfare area, also have made strategies and plans for how distribution of tasks could be done in a better way, by leaving some practical tasks that professionals do today to people without a professional background in care and welfare (Støvern, 2023). As examples, they mention preparing meals, emptying waste, shovelling snow, and following users to different activities.

The nurses’ trade union, however, warns against going too far with such a development, and fears that users will not get sufficiently competent help (Grønning & Jensen, 2023). The report “Time for action” (NOU 2023: 4) has met strong criticism for its conclusion, which the critics claim will lead to reduced staffing in the welfare services and contribute to a weathering of the welfare state (Christie et al., 2023). They claim that how much resources society is willing to spend on health and welfare is a political choice, and that there are other solutions than reducing the number of employees in welfare services. Alternative solutions pointed at are: reducing the considerable share of part-time employees in services, strengthening the efforts to recruit and educate more professionals, raising wages, and making working conditions less exhausting for employees.

van Bochove et al. (2018) differ between what they call “demarcation work” and “welcoming work”, when they examine how professionals and volunteers construct,

maintain and dissolve boundaries between them in the welfare services. “Demarcation work” relates to situations where differences in knowledge, authority and reliability between professionals and volunteers are emphasised. “Welcoming work” involves the efforts of professionals to welcome non-professionals to their professional domain, which has the potential to transform boundaries between professionals and non-professionals. The domains are not set up once and for all, but are constantly (re)crafted. A discussion about where the boundaries between professional and non-professional work are to be drawn must include consideration of how formal positions, knowledge, expertise, resources, and possibilities for defining the premises of co-creation, can also create barriers between the actors (Brandsen et al., 2018; Røhnebæk & Bjerck, 2021). Studies conclude that services often want to define the premises of cooperation with volunteers, and try to manipulate the process to make the results match their own values and interests (Andfossen, 2021; Bouchard, 2016). On the other hand, professional resistance could be seen as an important part of their job as defenders of a strong welfare state.

## Conclusion

What is seen as a sustainable welfare state depends on ideological and political positions. Regardless of position, few will see co-creation as the final solution to the welfare state’s sustainability challenges. To what degree and in what ways co-creation could be seen as a strategy to preserve the sustainability of the welfare state will depend on how the concepts are interpreted. Co-creation includes policies and strategies that might contribute to making welfare services stronger and more democratic, but also might legitimise a consumerist welfare policy and the dismantling of the welfare state by pushing responsibility from the public sphere to individual citizens, their families and non-public actors like volunteers. The policy discourse will in turn frame the discussion about the practical implementation of co-creation. Such a discussion should include what consequences the co-creation discourse could have for the professional role in the welfare and care sector. This article shows that welfare more strongly based on co-creation represents challenges to what important competencies for welfare professionals are and should be. It calls for a discussion about the need for new and more diverse competencies among welfare professionals, and about professional openness regarding how services should be organised and performed in the future. For instance, it could imply that subjects like social sciences, organisational theory, and management become more important, depending on what tasks professionals are set to perform in society.

Not least, the development requires professionals with comprehensive reflective competence. Brookfield (2009) introduces a distinction between “reflection” and “critical reflection” when discussing what should be important competence among welfare workers. Reflection implies that professionals take a step back and consider practices and arrangements in their daily work. To qualify as critical, reflection must include reflection on structural factors and issues of power relations, and the ability to challenge hegemonic assumptions that appear undisputable. For welfare professionals taking a role as professional co-creators, both kinds of reflection are important. The implementation of co-creation in practice appears as a balancing act. Professionals should have the ability to manoeuvre between being defenders of the welfare state and strong public services, and being open for encouraging, instigating and coordinating innovative arrangements that include cooperation and active involvement from users and other actors. How to combine such roles

represents an important challenge for professionals and institutions that educate future welfare professionals and conduct research in the welfare area.

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