Local Challenges Research Office

Principles of Co-Creation with Local Communities

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Who is this guide for?

This guide is relevant to anyone who is interested in working with communities to conduct place-based research. It is designed to act as a reflexive tool to better enable researchers and communities to consider the complexities of co-creation, for example:

- giving everyone, whoever they are the chance to take part;
- making sure people have ownership of their ideas;
- and finding ways to build together change that lasts.

The principles were produced by the Local Challenges Research Office (LCRO), a place-based team of researchers and practitioners based at Swansea University in Wales. The guide is a way of supporting Swansea University academics and our partners to facilitate co-created research and encourage a greater degree of shared ownership. However, we see 'place' and co-creation as something we're all increasingly interested in and hope that the guide will also be useful and of interest to others.

Who is my community?

When we talk about community, this essentially means the people you see, meet, or connect with regularly in your everyday life and business. Each of us will belong to many communities throughout our lives. Community can be interpreted in many ways, but some typical types of community include:

Communities of Place	Your neighbours, local community groups, businesses, people you see around you when go about your daily life.
Communities of Practice	The people you regularly do an activity with, be it a hobby, social activity, or professionally.

Communities of Interest	People you share an interest, characteristic or goal with. This could include strangers in an online or interest group.
Communities of Use	People who are related through use of an item or service, such as consumers of coffee or citizens receiving social services support from a local council.

In the context of co-created activities, working with communities implies involving those people who are connected in some way to the subject of interest, place, or practice. In a sense, co-created research always works with communities of communities. Because this can get confusing, when we say "community" co-creation, in practice this means we try to involve people who have a direct interest in the research project while keeping the project manageable.

What is co-creation and why is it Important?

Co-creation is one of many words used to describe the ways that people can participate in the process of creating something. For research, this usually means that everybody involved in a research project can exercise some level of agency and control over the project itself and their involvement. This contrasts to traditional types of research where an academic may have done research on or to people. Instead of *doing to*, we now talk about *doing with*.
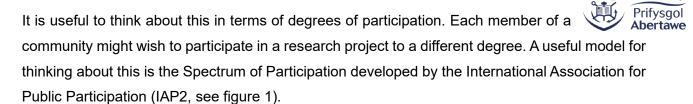
As a general definition, at LCRO we understand co-creation to be:

> *A process by which communities can work together in equal partnership in collaborative spaces, valuing and building on the strengths of all participants to identify local challenges and pursue equitable solutions.*

However, achieving this in practice requires a principled approach. This document sets out the principles by which LCRO aims to conduct research and encourage those working in and with LCRO to do the same.

Do I have to co-create?

Co-creation, by definition, must be entirely voluntary and consensual. As researchers seeking to work with communities, we are keen for communities to fully participate in and own research projects. However, we recognise that this is often not possible or desirable for many reasons. Co-created research must allow for individuals to contribute to research on their own terms, even if that means opting out. As such, co-creation is not always the best option and it must be a well-justified and reasoned choice.

It is useful to think about this in terms of degrees of participation. Each member of a community might wish to participate in a research project to a different degree. A useful model for thinking about this is the Spectrum of Participation developed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2, see figure 1).

inform → consult → involve → collaborate empower →

Figure 1 - The spectrum of participation (IAP2). The are arrows represent increasing degrees of participation (rather than a sequential progression of steps)

This model views participation from the researcher's perspective in terms of how they can involve people in research. It ranges from a minimal and passive level of participation (inform) up to maximal and active participation (empower). At the lower end, "inform" means offering to share ideas of evidence with people to help them understand a problem or think about potential solutions. At the other end, "empower" means that the community takes full control of a project from inception to evaluation. In the IAP2 model, any degree of participation can be appropriate and there is no ideal type of participation. Instead, it is a tool to help think about the ways people might want to participate.

Development of the principles

We developed the co-creation principles by referring to a wide range of existing expertise. We recognise that we're not the first to do this and wanted to build on other people's work. Some important examples in other contexts include:

- The Co-Production Network for Wales
- The Co-production Collective (UCL)
- The Oxfam Co-creation toolkit

We began by reviewing research on co-creation, engagement, and participation. We also sought out existing models of co-creation from organisations that actively practice it such as charities, NGOs, and government bodies. From this review, we identified a range of useful documents (listed at the end of this guide). We read these and wrote notes on their key ideas about co-creation. We considered each carefully in terms of our own values and context, sorted them into themes, and then refined them into principles. We took these principles to a group of experts to ask their opinion and seek feedback, which we then refined. The result of this process are the principles in this guide.

Two key sources informed the development of our principles. A chief inspiration for developing co-creation principles was the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015). This is a

groundbreaking legislative framework that promotes sustainable development, collective wellbeing, and collaboration between public bodies and people. The Act introduces five ways of working - long term, integration, involvement, collaboration and prevention - which align closely with the values underlying the co-creation principles.

The second key source was the Principles of Community Engagement for Empowerment which were produced by Public Health Wales in 2019. This complementary guide informed our own principles, with substantial conceptual alignment despite differences in context. It was especially useful in demonstrating rigorous co-production processes and presenting an accessible, values-driven framework. Though we sought to emulate aspects of their approach, our principles were developed independently and tailored to our specific aims reflecting the context of place-based co-creation of research.

Through this process, it is our hope that our co-creation principles can support community-based research that has positive impacts beyond academic outputs. We encourage you to use this guide as a starting point for reflection, then adapt and expand the principles as needed to fit each unique context.

LCRO Principles of Co-Creation

1. Lasting Relationships

   Build long-term connections and collaborations based on mutual understanding, trust, and care.

2. Community Voice

   Respect local knowledges and practices and how they inform understandings of assets, needs, and opportunities.

3. Local Evidence

   Build collective understanding by learning about local experiences and using place-based evidence to help everyone understand the bigger picture.

4. Shared Ownership

   Make sure that power and resources are shared equitably so that everyone's contributions are valued and their capacity for participation respected.

5. Easy to Reach

   Continuously explore how to make spaces and practices more accessible and receptive to locally representative communities.

6. The Long Run

   Empower communities to independently sustain change by using or adapting existing resources, services, and relationships.

1. Lasting Relationships

Build long-term connections and collaborations based on mutual understanding, trust, and care.

Positive change and sustainable impact in research often result from long-term relationships and the deep understanding of places and people that come from spending time with people. Through regular contact, those involved can better understand each other and develop the trust that is necessary to negotiate the complexities of co-creation.

High familiarity with a community and its contexts creates a much more robust sense of any challenges that arise, what responses might be appropriate for a given place or community, and where co-created research might prove mutually beneficial. This, alongside our capacity as researchers to develop and share a holistic awareness of local challenges and evidence on them, can allow us to support communities to better understand their situations.

Over time, we hope to encourage and enable communities to engage in a degree of participation in co-created research in their own time and on their own terms. We recognise that people, relationships, and challenges all change and that our own work needs to remain flexible and open to growth or even withdrawal, if appropriate.

Reflexive Questions:

1. Why is making long-lasting connections important in your work and personal life?
2. Think of a friendship or work relationship that lasted a long time. How could these principles improve how you connect with people in co-created projects?
3. How can being flexible and adaptable in your relationships help in collaboration, both in research and everyday situations?

2. Community Voice

Respect local knowledges and practices and how they inform understandings of assets, needs, and opportunities.

Successful co-creation involves participants being open-minded to various ways of thinking and valuing all voices and contributions, acknowledging that no single approach is universally effective. A core strength of co-creation is the potential to bring together many different perspectives to provide a holistic understanding of a problem or idea that a single person could not achieve. This means that each participant's beliefs, abilities, cultures, and concerns should be welcome and valued.

Further, effective co-creation should seek appropriate representation, with participants ensuring that those involved are a reasonable cross-section of the relevant communities. When participants engage with and respect diversity, they can achieve a more complex understanding of local issues and approach a co-created common purpose and vision that can inspire enthusiasm and action in participants.

Careful governance and community responsibility is therefore important for co-created research, for instance in ensuring principled reflection on whose voices are represented and valued throughout the co-creation process to avoid unconscious bias. It is also important take an asset-based perspective. This means actively shifting discussions away from what is lacking or what can't be done to instead mapping and drawing on what can be collectively done about any issues that a community faces.

Reflexive Questions:

1. Why is it important to listen to different opinions when making decisions, not just in research but in various areas of life?
2. Think back to a time when one voice dominated a discussion. How might considering other voices have positively impacted the situation? How could other voices have been included?
3. Why is effective communication and understanding different perspectives important? How can we encourage this in a community setting without taking control of co-creation processes?

3. Local Evidence

Build collective understanding by learning about local experiences and using place-based evidence to help everyone understand the bigger picture.

Good co-creation ensures all participants can access and understand holistic perspectives and evidence.

Developing mutual understanding comes first. This involves creating space to actively listening to each other, appreciating a range of perspectives, and valuing local knowledge. Maintaining listening is especially important for those with strong professional knowledge as it ensures co-creation processes are informed by place-based and contextual factors that shape local manifestations of larger societal challenges.

There is also an important role for facilitators to present and translate complex local evidence to inform co-creation efforts. They may initiate engagement by educating communities about relevant research, statistics, and policy related to local issues they have identified. Alternatively, communities can identify issues then explore existing evidence collected and explained by a facilitator.

Engaging existing local practitioners is essential. Those actively supporting the community, such as service providers, charities, and local businesses, have valuable insight into local challenges. While impossible to engage all, co-creation should identify and respect the knowledge, experience, and evidence they hold.

Triangulating community knowledge, macro-evidence, and local practice insights can be an effective way of directing co-created research. Given the high resource cost of co-creation, local needs and opportunities must be carefully weighed to ensure just distribution of research expertise.

Reflexive Questions:

1. How does considering local knowledge and evidence make decision-making better, both in research and other parts of life?
2. Think of a time when local information helped you understand a problem. How did you come across this information and what was it that helped? How can we ensure communities have and understand good evidence during co-creation?
3. Why is it important for research, particularly co-created research, to contribute to positive change not only within specific communities or fields but also in addressing broader societal challenges?

4. Shared Ownership

Make sure that power and resources are shared equitably so that everyone's contributions are valued and their capacity for participation respected.

Just as communities can negotiate their level of participation in co-creation processes, co-creation implies with a level of responsibility. From the start, participants should therefore negotiate with the lead researcher an appropriate level of facilitation, co-ordination, and evaluation. How much a researcher can intervene and guide the process must be made clear to all parties.

Structures enabling collective ownership are key, ensuring no single voice or community dominates. The researcher should check that participants are a good cross-section of the relevant community and consider carefully how all voices can be heard and understood. This is a continual reflexive process, as needs and power dynamics can evolve, but reasonable considerations include committing resources to translation, seeking accessible venues, or publishing results in simple terms. Equally, participants should feel they are respected and valued by the whole group and facilitators should be prepared to manage potential conflicts.

Researchers must be ready to relinquish power over direction and commit to transparency about resources, especially where funding is in place. While it is complex to directly share financial resources (especially with vulnerable populations), the deployment of resources can directed by the community. More importantly, outcomes of co-creation should be negotiated and controlled by participants and not hindered by slow academic processes. For instance, outputs such as providing training, feedback, evaluation, or support can be co-designed to be locally meaningful.

Reflexive Questions:

1. Why is it good to work together and make decisions as a team, not just in research but in different group projects?
2. Remember a time when a group project worked well. How might the idea of sharing ownership apply in other teamwork situations, and why is it important to address challenges together?
3. How can working collaboratively and negotiating shared ownership positively impact co-created research and contribute to sustained community engagement?

5. Easy to Reach

Contiuously explore how to make spaces and practices more accessible and receptive to locally representative communities.

Effective co-creation should actively prioritise inclusion and accessibility for all those impacted by the research. Public engagement often amplifies a few dominant voices and potential for over-representation. Seeing beyond a loud minority takes careful consideration and consultation on how to welcome and include all voices. Both researchers and participants must exhibit a willingness to adapt; any lack of representation indicates challenges in reaching or engaging with the research.

Co-created research therefore cannot take a standardized approach and instead work on the communities' terms. This means being open and receptive to what could exclude or alienate, including venue and time choice, use of language(s), and expected time commitment. Specific considerations will vary by community, requiring anticipation of issues tied to disability, age, gender, socioeconomic status, employment, race and language, among others. While accommodating diverse needs is essential, it's vital to acknowledge constraints imposed by limited resources and time.

Most importantly, participants should feel respected, with their knowledge and opinions valued (unless intolerant). Achieving this requires intentional reflexivity from the researcher and potentially training for participants. Critical engagement is important; recognizing and addressing power imbalances within social groups is integral to successful co-creation. Initiating relationships in communities therefore requires careful attention to local dynamics and tensions so as to build trust with all groups. Listening closely to local knowledge and discerning whose voices are (not) being heard and who stands to gain from co-create activities and outputs is essential for achieving equitable co-created activities and outcomes.

Reflexive Questions:

1. Why is it important to make sure everyone can be part of a project, both at work and in the community?
2. Think about a time when it was hard for someone to join in. How might making things more accessible be useful in various situations, especially in co-created research where inclusivity is crucial?
3. How can focusing on accessibility help build trust and connections within communities, not just in specific projects but also in broader contexts?

6. The Long Run

Empower communities to independently sustain change by using or adapting existing resources, services, and relationships.

Communities' co-created achievements should be sustainable. This is difficult when projects rely on funding and researcher engagement; once financial support ends, so do the structures that enabled change. To empower communities to independently nurture their co-created achievements, proactive measures must be taken early in the process.

Active involvement in the community beyond specific projects is important for those engaged in co-creation, fostering enduring relationships. It is therefore important to be transparent and upfront about capacity and resources beyond specific projects in order to manage expectations and prevent overdependency.

Efforts in co-created research should aim for sustainability without reliance on continuous funding and external resources. For instance, in each local context, existing resources and structures should be used or improved. There may be willing community members who can be trained to lead or maintain project outcomes, especially as part of their usual employment. Where community assets have been mapped or used, provision can be put in place to ensure local awareness and their continued use.

Finally, co-creation processes should drive systems and culture change. Identifying new collaboration, efficiency and public engagement opportunities within local public services is key. However, without commitment to change at an organizational level, powerful structures may hinder desired transformations. For a project to continue its successes, there must be a local and institutional wiliness to commit to change and continually reflect on how to improve; co-creation's potential is limited without collective commitment to change both at the organizational and individual levels.

Reflexive Questions:

1. Why is it good to plan for the future in your work and life, thinking beyond immediate goals?
2. Consider projects you know of that lasted a long time. What contributed to their long-term success? How might this work for co-created research?
3. Why is a commitment to continual improvement important in fostering lasting change? How can we encourage this kind of change in ourselves and in groups we work with?

References

The principles in this document are a synthesis of ideas from the following resources:

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