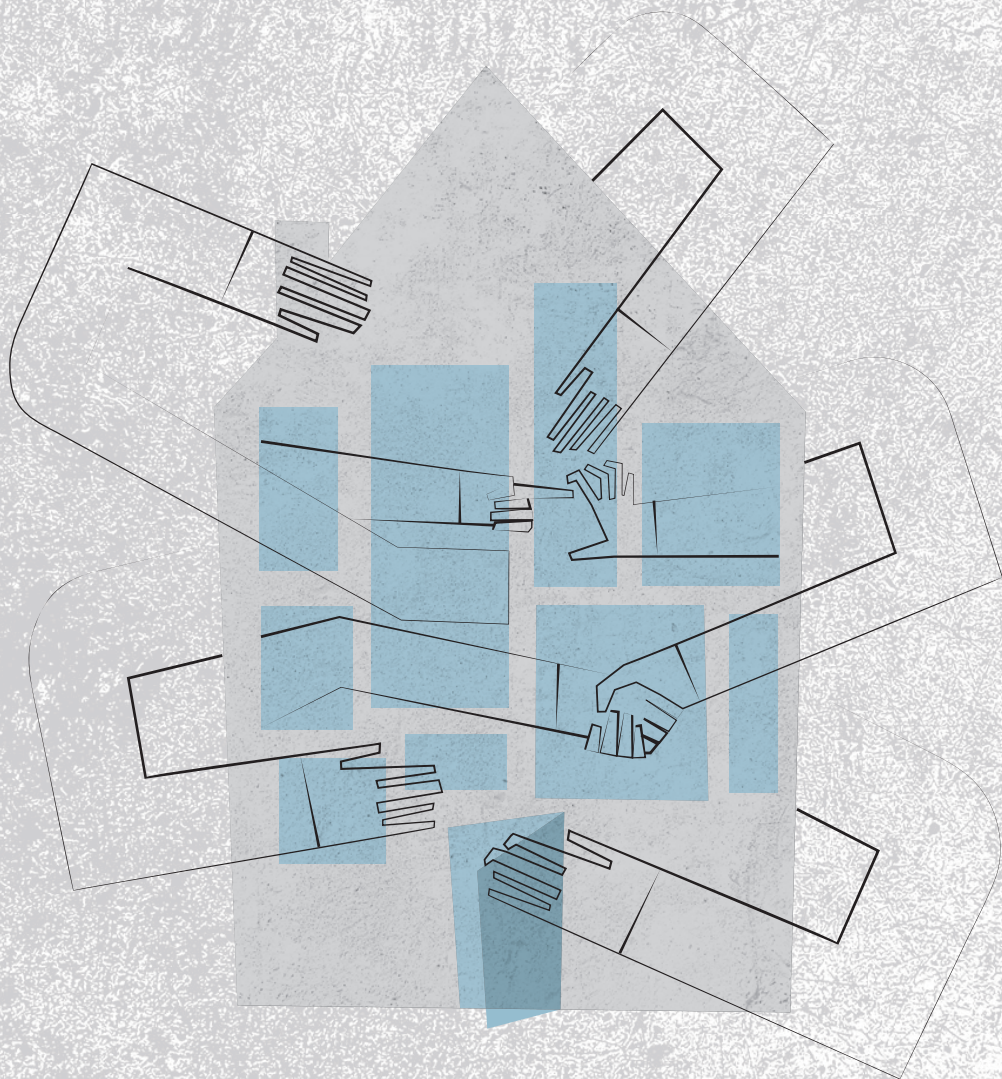


From intentions to practice:

How vulnerable citizens co-produce
homeless services



Institute for
Management Research

Menno Hoppen

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From intentions to practice: How vulnerable citizens co-produce homeless services

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From intentions to practice
How vulnerable citizens co-produce homeless services

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Contents

Chapter 1.

Introduction	11
1.1 Background	12
1.2 Research aim and questions	15
1.3 Methodological approach and empirical setting	16
1.4 Relevance	18
1.5 Structure of this dissertation	19

Chapter 2.

Theoretical background	23
Introduction	24
2.1 Background and definition of co-production	24
2.2 Conceptualizing co-production	27
2.3 Co-production and vulnerable citizens	34
2.4 The street-level situation: three narratives	41
Chapter overview	50

Chapter 3.

Analytical framework	53
3.1 Defining and analyzing the success of co-production	54
3.2 Theoretically explaining when co-production is successful	61

Chapter 4.

Methods	75
4.1 Research design	76
4.2 Fieldwork	79
4.3 Data analysis	86
4.4 Positionality and reflexivity	89
4.5 Epistemology and research quality	91
Conclusion	92

Chapter 5.

Introducing the context and cases: Two homeless service providers, four co-productions	95
5.1 The policy field: Homeless services	96
5.2 The organizations	99
Chapter overview	110
Empirical section I: Intentions and practice	113

Chapter 6.

Co-production as intended	115
6.1 NuNN	117
6.2 DRG	119
6.3 Overview of the programs as designed	128
6.4 Central differences between the co-production programs as designed	130

Chapter 7.

Co-production in practice	135
Introduction	136
7.1 NuNN	137
7.2 DRG	144
7.3 Between intentions and practice	161
Empirical section II: Daily processes of co-production	173

Chapter 8.

Group dynamics	175
Introduction	176
8.1 Characteristics of groups: size, stability, and participants' vulnerabilities	176
8.2 Regulating group dynamics	181
8.3 Implications: Self-regulation in group co-production	193
Conclusion	195

Chapter 9.

Frontline dynamics in co-production	197
9.1 Mechanisms of professional support: Structuring, guiding, and intervening	198
9.2 Frontline challenges in supporting co-production	203
9.3 An extreme illustration: The limits of co-production	211
Section conclusion: The dynamics of co-production	217

Empirical section III: Conditions for successful co-production	221
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Chapter 10.

The participant group: Composition, trust, and commitment	223
10.1 A balanced group in capacity, vulnerability, and personality	224
10.2 Trust (and distrust) among participants	227
10.3 Participants' commitment	230
Conclusion	238

Chapter 11.

Program structure: Alignment with user wishes, needs, and capacities	241
11.1 Material incentives matter – but not sufficiently for sustained engagement	242
11.2 Low barriers for participation, flexibility, and opportunities to grow	245
11.3 Selection and exclusion mechanisms	248
Conclusion	250

Chapter 12.

Professional support	253
12.1 Practical facilitation of co-production	255
12.2 Building trust amid distrust	255
12.3 Creating mutual commitment	259
12.4 Balancing co-production with other requirements	265
12.5 Frontline beliefs and commitment	268
Conclusion	273

Chapter 13.

Organizational conditions	275
13.1 Resourcing co-production	276
13.2 Shaping frontline conditions conducive to co-production	278
13.3 Program-organization structures: autonomy, coordination, risk-bearing	280
13.4 Alignment with the organizational mission and culture	282
13.5 Organizational commitment to co-production	285
13.6 External institutional conditions	288
Conclusion	293
Section conclusion: Conditions for successful co-production	295

Chapter 14.

Conclusion and discussion	299
14.1 Answering the research questions: From intentions to conditions	301
14.2 Theoretical implications	311
14.3 Methodological implications	325
14.4 Avenues for future research	327
14.5 Implications for practice	331
14.6 Closing remarks: What makes co-production with vulnerable citizens different?	337
 Bibliography	 341
 Appendices	 357
Appendix 1. Overview of research participants	358
Appendix 2. Data management	361
Appendix 3. Example of an informed consent form	363
Appendix 4. Topic lists interviews	365
Appendix 5. House rules for residents at NuNN	368
Appendix 6. Agreement of intent client participation DRG	370
Appendix 7. Caretaker role and rules	372
Nederlandse samenvatting	374
English summary	378
About the author	382
Dankwoord	384



Chapter 1.

Introduction

“It’s not just a job. You have serious responsibilities. Sometimes you have the guys’ lives in your hands. Your decision is very important. You can let something go, keep going, or you can stop him. You give him a warning, a second warning. On the third, he’s out of the project. What is going to be next for him? It’s your responsibility – you do it.” (CP14)

“I find it hard to stay neutral. I think most of us just go with our gut. And honestly, that means you stop treating people fairly. (...) I know that’s wrong. But it’s just how I feel.” (CP10)

“Sometimes it hurts when someone shows up at the door asking if they can sleep here. And I have to say no. (...) That’s the hardest part.” (CP15)

Together, these reflections resemble the classic moral struggles of street-level bureaucrats – those who make decisions about the fates of citizens on a daily basis (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 3; Lipsky 1980/2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). We hear the weight of discretionary power, the tension of maintaining professional neutrality, and the emotional toll of rationing scarce resources, offering a direct glimpse into the “*world of tensions, ambiguity, and difficult – often painful – choices and judgments*” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, xi).

Yet these reflections were not voiced by police officers, teachers, or social workers. They came from people experiencing homelessness – shelter users themselves – who have taken an active role in co-producing shelter services. And though these reflections might, at first glance, appear as a somber depiction of the burdens of co-production, they should be seen as a sign of success: they show that the most vulnerable can be meaningfully involved in co-production, taking genuine responsibility in service provision.

This phenomenon of co-production of public services with vulnerable citizens – how it unfolds in practice, the challenges it entails, and how it can succeed – lies at the heart of this dissertation.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Transformed citizen-state relations

The reflections briefly introduced above do not stand alone. The shifting roles of frontline workers and citizens (Hupe and Hill 2007; Mortensen et al. 2021) are

indicative of a larger change in ideas about the relationship between citizens and their state that has permeated democracies over recent decades (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, 2015; Osborne 2010; Bryson et al. 2014; Torfing et al. 2020). Citizens, communities, and civil society organizations are increasingly viewed not merely as target groups or recipients of services but as active partners in governance.

This shift in thinking is generally seen as a reaction to the limitations of previous governance paradigms and to emerging societal challenges (Bryson et al. 2014, 445; Meijer 2016; Brandsen et al. 2017; Brandsen et al. 2018; Torfing et al. 2020). New paradigms – such as the New Public Service (NPS) (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000, 2015) and New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne 2006, 2010) – have re-emphasized values that were neglected in previous paradigms, most notably Traditional Public Administration (TPA) and New Public Management (NPM) (Aberbach and Christensen 2005; Denhardt and Denhardt 2015).¹ In these more recent perspectives on governance, citizens are no longer regarded merely as voters in the political process or as clients and customers of public services, but as co-producers or co-creators actively involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy (e.g., Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b; Osborne 2021). This transformation is partly driven by broader processes of democratization and the increasing horizontalization of social relations, which have reshaped expectations about the role of citizens and civil society vis-à-vis the state (Meijer 2016). At the same time, such participatory forms of governance are promoted as a potential response to contemporary challenges, including concerns about declining state legitimacy, population aging and the resulting pressure on the welfare state, growing societal fragmentation and political polarization, and the rise of complex *wicked problems* that are no longer believed to be solvable by the state alone.

1.1.2 Co-production of public services

This dissertation focuses on one of the most direct and individually consequential forms of the evolving relationship between citizens and the state: co-production. This relationship is characterized by high levels of proximity, as it often involves longer-term, personal interactions between citizens and service providers. Moreover, these interactions affect citizens' daily lives immediately, in the public services they use.

^{1.} In practice, such paradigms do not follow each other as neatly as this narrative suggests. For instance, Van Gestel and Alm Andreassen (2025) show that these paradigms did not succeed one another in a strictly sequential manner. Moreover, there are examples of policy developments reflecting New Public Governance before the introduction of New Public Management.

The concept of co-production builds on the insight that the work of public service providers is rarely a one-directional delivery of products, but that processes and outcomes depend critically on the actions and contributions of citizens themselves (Sharp 1980; Whitaker 1980; Parks et al. 1981). Therefore, scholars have argued that public services can be improved by recognizing and valuing this role, and by actively involving citizens in service design and delivery (e.g., Ostrom 1996; Alford 2002; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). In this dissertation, co-production is defined as *“a relationship between a service provider and (group of) service user(s), in which the user(s) contribute directly and actively to the planning, design, and/or delivery of public services”* (adapted from Brandsen and Honingh 2016, 431).

Co-production is often seen as a promising way to improve public service provision (Loeffler and Bovaird 2018; Brix et al. 2020; Acar et al. 2025). Generally, co-production is associated with the promise to increase public services' effectiveness, responsiveness, efficiency, and provide innovation potential; and it may improve service relationships between citizens and service providers and enhance the democratic quality of public services. This potential stems from the premise that users are indispensable for the success of service delivery outcomes, as they possess knowledge and resources that providers lack, which is expected to result in better outcomes (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012).

1.1.3 Involving vulnerable citizens in co-production

Perhaps co-production carries the most considerable promise for services aimed at vulnerable citizens – people who depend on public services for basic needs or livelihood. Such dependency typically arises from a combination of mental or physical health problems and material deficits (such as financial hardship or housing instability) (Numans et al. 2021). Because these citizens both rely on services and often experience power imbalances in service relationships, co-production's promises – of recognizing and valuing citizens' contributions, improving effectiveness and responsiveness, and enhancing democratic quality of services – may be particularly valuable for them. By shifting the role of citizens from dependent clients to active contributors, co-production acts as a potential counterweight to such power imbalances (Ostrom 1996). If co-production can indeed deliver on these promises in such contexts, vulnerable citizens stand to benefit the most.

While vulnerable groups are generally underrepresented in traditional forms of political participation, the service provision stage may offer a better opportunity for them to influence service delivery (Brandsen 2021; Park 2020). First, co-production is about involving users in providing services that directly affect them (Ostrom 1996).

Therefore, people may attach greater salience to these services, thereby increasing their willingness to co-produce (Brandsen 2021, 535; Pestoff 2012; Van Eijk and Steen 2016). Second, people could feel more capable of co-producing. In contrast to traditional participation, co-production does not necessarily involve policy deliberation but may also involve fulfilling everyday tasks (Brandsen 2021, 535). Finally, it may be easier to deliberate in co-production too: whereas some citizens may not perceive themselves to be capable (or do not feel comfortable) in public deliberative meetings, they may feel more capable of participating in familiar settings on topics which are of direct consequence to them.

At the same time, successful co-production depends on citizens' capacities and resources to participate, as well as on professionals' willingness to share control (Broadhurst 2024). These preconditions may be less present when working with vulnerable citizens. While co-production may offer greater potential for inclusion than other participatory mechanisms, it remains challenging to achieve in practice (Vanleene 2020, 56). Without special attention to inclusion and representation, co-production initiatives risk reproducing familiar patterns: those who are already well-represented tend to engage, while others abstain (Sorrentino et al. 2018, 283; Brandsen 2021). Thus, those who could benefit most from co-production may be least able – or be perceived as such – to participate (Rosentraub and Sharp 1981, 460; Park 2020, 453). Involving vulnerable citizens thus represents a critical test for the promise of co-production.

Empirically, we still know surprisingly little about what it takes to make co-production work in such contexts (Brandsen 2021; Cullingworth et al. 2024; Broadhurst 2024). While recent years have seen a surge of interest in including vulnerable citizens, the evidence is uneven. Some initiatives suggest it can be done, offering people real control in shaping the services they rely on (Van Dijck and Steen 2023). Others, however, report only limited success in co-production efforts to deliver on their associated ideals of empowering service users in the process (Fledderus 2015; Vanleene et al. 2018).

1.2 Research aim and questions

This dissertation aims to generate insights into the practice of co-production with vulnerable citizens,² the processes that shape how it unfolds, and the conditions that enable it to succeed. In this dissertation, the success of co-production is understood as the degree to which an initiative's everyday practices reflect its intentions.

^{2.} In this dissertation, I use the term citizens not to denote a legal distinction between citizens and non-citizens, but in a moral sense, referring to all people who make use of, or are affected by, public services, including those without Dutch citizenship or a formal residence status.

The following main question guides the study:

Under which conditions can co-production with vulnerable citizens succeed?

To answer this overarching question, this dissertation addresses four sub-questions:

1. What do we know about co-production with vulnerable citizens, and under which theoretical conditions can we expect it to succeed?
2. How are the co-production programs designed, and how does everyday practice compare to these intentions?
3. Which processes shape the everyday practice of co-production?
4. Which conditions influence how these processes unfold?

These sub-questions provide the broad framework this study addresses in distinct sections. Some of these questions are further specified in the chapters within those sections to align with the specific empirical focus of each chapter. A visual roadmap of how these questions relate to the sections and chapters of this dissertation will be provided in Figure 1.1 at the end of this introduction.

1.3 Methodological approach and empirical setting

To address these questions, this dissertation draws on comparative ethnographic research conducted at two Dutch homeless shelter service providers. There are two reasons why I chose this context for this research. First, homelessness constitutes one of the most severe forms of social exclusion. The absence of housing deprives people of a fundamental human need, fostering dependence on external support. While the (global) housing crisis and shortage of affordable housing (e.g., Coupe 2020; FEANTSA 2025; Hochstenbach 2025) have increasingly made even people without complex care problems susceptible to homelessness, the target group of Dutch emergency shelters tends to suffer from more than just a lack of housing. Generally, these shelter services are specifically aimed at those who not only lack housing but also struggle with a host of other issues – poverty, debt, addiction, and psychosocial problems – typically associated with homelessness (e.g., Van Everdingen et al. 2021). Secondly, there are pronounced ambitions to make homeless services more co-productive in the field. Ministries, municipalities, professional associations, and service providers all emphasize their ambitions to give current and former homeless service users more voice and control in the design and delivery of public services (e.g., Rijksoverheid 2022; Valente 2023). This combination of a highly vulnerable target group with widespread co-production aspirations makes homeless services a suitable policy field for this research.

This dissertation focuses on two service-providing organizations that push these co-production ambitions further than most others in the field: *Nachtopvang uit Noodzaak Nijmegen* (Night Shelter out of Necessity, NuNN) and *De Regenboog Groep* (The Rainbow Group, DRG) in Amsterdam. NuNN represents an extreme form of co-production. It was established as a self-management initiative in which people experiencing homelessness run the shelter themselves and take part in its decision-making. DRG, by contrast, is a larger service provider that has, over time, become increasingly oriented toward involving service users in the design and provision of its services. Currently, both pursue far-reaching forms of co-production with their service users. Because of this, they provide a fruitful context for examining co-production with vulnerable groups.

To gain insights into the practical realities of co-production, the processes that shape it, and the conditions that enable it, I have used a comparative ethnographic approach (Simmons and Smith 2019). Prolonged engagement in the field and the use of participant observation provide direct insight into the relational processes that characterize co-production (Brandsen and Honingh 2016). In addition, this approach helped me to build rapport with respondents, especially service users. The combination of observations, document analysis, and interviews with a wide range of stakeholders generated in-depth insight into the daily practice and processes of co-production. This enabled me to move abductively back and forth between data and theory and to compare episodes across cases to explain divergent outcomes, resulting in contrastive explanations (Lichterman and Reed 2014) of the conditions that make co-production possible in these cases. By analyzing two organizations within the same policy field, but operating in different municipalities, this study also provides insight into how processes and conditions across multiple levels shape co-production: at the micro level (interactions between professionals and participants), the meso level (program and organizational arrangements), and the macro level (the municipal and policy field context). Specifically, this study is based on approximately 240 hours of participant observation of meetings and everyday practices, 72 interviews with various stakeholders – including policymakers, managers, frontline workers, and service users – and an extensive document analysis of the organizational context and the co-production programs as designed.

Analytically, I will first map the organizational and policy context and describe the co-production arrangements as intended; I will then examine how these arrangements are implemented in practice. Next, I analyze the day-to-day processes that shape co-production. Finally, through a process of contrastive explanation, I will identify the enabling conditions under which co-production can succeed.

1.4 Relevance

This dissertation contributes to public administration research in four ways. First, it provides an in-depth investigation of the potential of co-production with vulnerable citizens. While co-production is widely promoted as a means to improve public services, we still know too little about whether and how vulnerable citizens can be meaningfully involved (Brandsen 2021; Broadhurst 2024; Cullingworth et al. 2024). This dissertation adds to the emerging research base on this topic by focusing on especially ambitious co-production efforts with an exceptionally vulnerable target group. This dissertation thereby provides novel insights into the potential and pitfalls of co-production.

Secondly, by employing an ethnographic approach, this dissertation sheds light on the social dynamics and processes that unfold in the everyday practice of co-production, which often remain unseen (Cullingworth et al. 2024). Observing and understanding these dynamics is especially important because co-production with vulnerable citizens is frequently seen as risking remaining rather tokenistic and paternalistic (Broadhurst 2024, 271; Park 2020, 458). By using participant observation to study co-production processes, this dissertation sheds new light on the mechanisms that shape the daily practice of co-production.

Thirdly, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of how co-production reshapes relationships between service users and professionals. Citizens – especially those in vulnerable positions – have traditionally been portrayed as relatively powerless in their interactions with service providers (Lipsky 2010; Hasenfeld 2010). Co-production implies a reconfiguration of traditional client-worker relationships (Needham 2020; Mortensen and Needham 2023). Yet we still know little about how such relationships take shape in practice, especially when service users exercise significant control over services through co-production. By providing rich empirical evidence of co-production with vulnerable citizens, this dissertation offers novel insights into how frontline dynamics may be transformed by co-production. This contributes to both the literature on co-production and street-level bureaucracy.

Fourthly, this dissertation expands our understanding of the conditions that enable co-production when working with vulnerable citizens. While existing research has provided valuable literature reviews (Brandsen 2021; Broadhurst 2024) or focused on specific inputs, such as resources, information, or social capital (Jakobsen and Andersen 2013; Stougaard 2020), or the roles of frontline professionals (Vanleene 2020), little research has been conducted into how these conditions on multiple levels shape and enable co-production processes. This dissertation contributes to the

literature by offering a multi-level framework that draws together insights on service users, program design, professional support, and the broader organizational and institutional environment (also see Figure 1.1 at the end of this chapter).

Finally, this dissertation is societally relevant. There are widespread ambitions to involve vulnerable citizens in the co-production of public services, particularly within homelessness care. For instance, the Dutch National Action Plan on Homelessness explicitly advocates for the integration of experiential knowledge across all phases of the policy cycle and service delivery (Rijksoverheid 2022). Similarly, popular methods and interventions in the Netherlands (e.g., Wolf and Jonker 2021; Housing First Nederland 2026) and abroad (e.g., Tsemberis et al. 2004; Pleace 2013), frequently champion the principle of user choice and self-direction (*eigen regie*) of clients. Such ambitions to make services more open to user involvement, however, are not new. For decades, policymakers have expressed a strong desire to involve citizens, clients, and communities more closely (e.g., Lipsky and Lounds 1976; Trappenburg 2008; Brandsen et al. 2017). In the 2000s and early 2010s, this sometimes took the form of wishful thinking, projecting expectations onto citizens – especially vulnerable ones – that they were not always able to meet (WRR 2017; SCP 2020). As a result, participatory initiatives failed to align with the everyday realities, capacities, and constraints of the people they target (also see Trappenburg 2008). There is therefore a need for more public administration research on the conditions under which co-production with vulnerable citizens can work in practice. This dissertation addresses this need by identifying the specific conditions at the participant group, frontline, and organizational levels that enable co-production with vulnerable citizens to work. In doing so, this study also offers a practical framework for policymakers and service providers to design co-production.

1.5 Structure of this dissertation

The sub-questions formulated previously (section 1.2) guide the structure of this dissertation, which is developed around three main parts (see Figure 1.1). Part I addresses the first sub-question and establishes the conceptual and methodological basis of the study. Chapter 2 conceptualizes co-production and vulnerability in the context of public service provision and reviews existing knowledge about co-production with vulnerable citizens. Building on these insights, it discusses the contexts in which co-production is typically pursued, drawing on theories of street-level bureaucracy. Chapter 3 then develops the analytical framework used throughout the dissertation, and Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach.

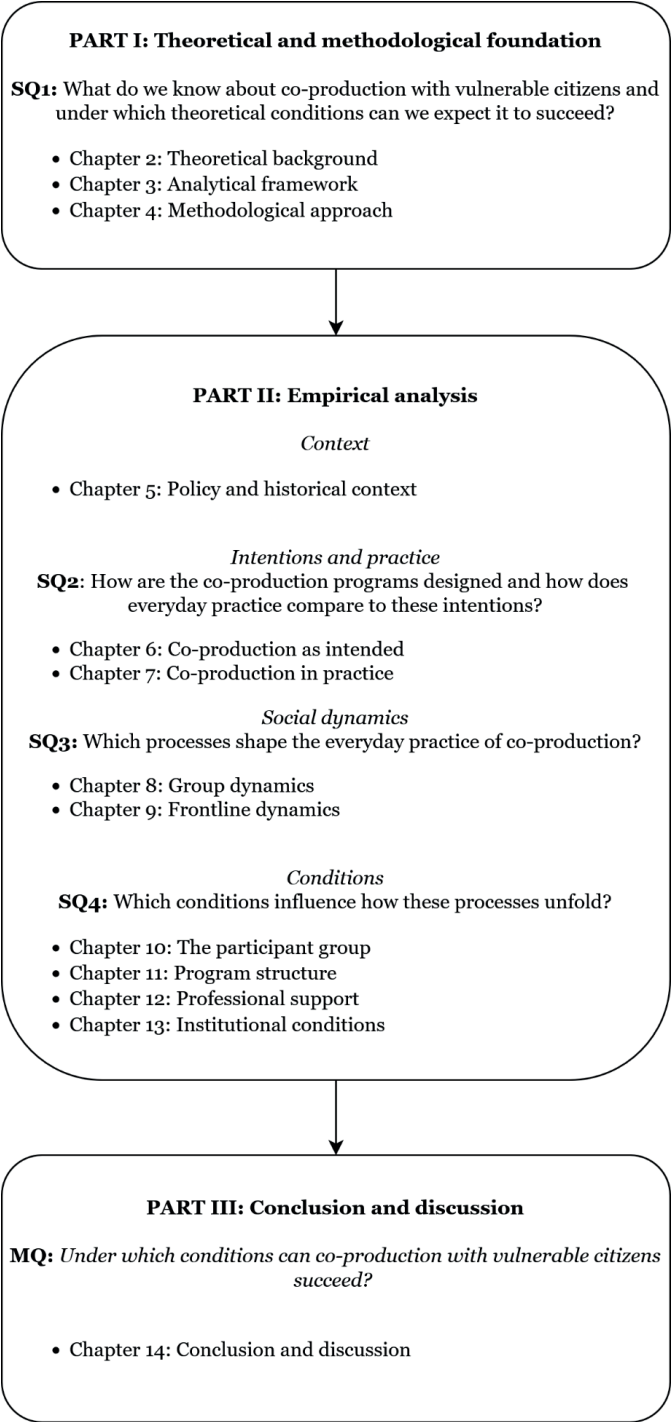


Figure 1.1 Structure of this dissertation

Part II presents the empirical analysis and answers sub-questions 2 to 4. However, before answering these research questions, Part II starts with an overview of the policy field and the historical context of the organizations. Consequently, this part is divided into four sections that examine: (i) the context, (ii) the design and practice of the co-productions, (iii) the dynamics that shape the daily processes of co-production, and (iv) the conditions that enable or constrain its success.

The first section focuses on the policy context and historical backgrounds of the co-production initiatives, the co-production programs as designed, and their implementation in everyday practice. This part thereby answers the second sub-question and provides insights into the success of co-production, seen here as a measure of program integrity: the degree to which the everyday practice of a co-production initiative reflects its intentions. The second section addresses the third sub-question by exploring the processes through which co-production unfolds, explicitly focusing on the role of group dynamics and frontline professionals. The third section addresses sub-question four and identifies the enabling conditions for co-production at the levels of participants, program structure, professional support, and the broader organizational and institutional context.

Part III concludes this dissertation by bringing together the findings to answer the main research question and discuss the implications of this study.



Chapter 2.

Theoretical background

Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical background of this dissertation by discussing the origins of co-production and establishing the definition used throughout this study. Central to this dissertation is a relational understanding of co-production, focusing on the interaction between the service user and the frontline worker (Brandsen and Honingh 2016). To explore this relationship, I will first examine it from the perspective of vulnerable citizens, analyzing their role and position in service delivery. Subsequently, I will look at their professional counterparts – the frontline workers – and the context in which they operate (Lipsky 2010). By integrating insights from the street-level bureaucracy literature and the co-production literature, I bring these perspectives together to assess the potential for co-production of services with vulnerable citizens. In doing so, this chapter provides the conceptual building blocks for the analytical framework developed in Chapter 3.

2.1 Background and definition of co-production

2.1.1 Origins of co-production

Elinor Ostrom and colleagues introduced the concept of co-production in their research on metropolitan service provision. Its original and most fundamental contribution was to highlight the role of citizens' inputs in the functioning of public services. The key insight is that service users – in some way or another – are inherently part of the production process (Garn et al. 1976, 14-15, cited in Parks et al. 1981, 1001). This challenged the prevailing assumption that public services could be 'delivered' as if they were products like televisions and toasters. Instead, the idea of co-production recognizes that outputs are shaped by the joint activities of both service providers and service users (Sharp 1980, 110). As Ostrom and Ostrom (1978) argued, the quality of many services depends critically on the active involvement of users. Education is a clear example: without students' active engagement, the value of teaching is minimal (also see Porter 2012). Similarly, public health depends not only on medical professionals, but also on citizens' preventive behavior; adequate fire protection requires both firefighters and vigilant residents; and public safety hinges on cooperation between citizens and police.

This foundational recognition that public service providers often depend as much on their service users as vice versa for the effectiveness of their work (also see Osborne and Strokosch 2013, 33) led to another imperative, namely that collaboration between service users and providers could be crucial for the effectiveness of public services (Ostrom and Ostrom 1978).

In short, from this early literature, two lines of thought emerged. First, co-production emphasizes recognition of citizens' contributions to service outcomes. Second, it points to the potential importance of collaboration between service providers and users to align these contributions.

2.1.2 An alternative paradigm

From its inception, co-production was not only framed as a way to increase the efficiency or effectiveness of service delivery; early work on co-production also highlighted its potential democratic significance. Whitaker (1980), for instance, found it remarkable that political scientists devoted substantial attention to citizen participation at the *input* stage of the policy process, but largely ignored involvement in the *output* stage. The dominant assumption seemed to be that once policies were formulated, implementation was a mechanical process in which citizens played no meaningful role: *"in such a view, government may be democratic, but administration is not. Administration is seen as technical, and therefore, neutral"* (Whitaker 1980, 214). However, upcoming studies on implementation and street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980/2010) showed that policy outcomes are also shaped at the point of delivery. The early co-production literature can be seen as part of this same intellectual movement: building on these insights, it highlighted that the activities of service users are not merely influenced by service delivery, but are themselves co-determinative of its outcomes.

For some authors, this insight constituted more than an additional perspective on service delivery: it signaled a broader paradigm shift in the citizen-state relationship (Sharp, 1980; Rosentraub and Sharp, 1981). Sharp (1980) saw co-production as an alternative to the dominant model of service delivery, in which *"while government 'performs,' citizens consume and pass judgment"* (108). From this perspective, citizens might be involved in policy planning or in voicing complaints, but their role in delivering services was passive and neglected. The alternative model based on co-production, instead, emphasized mutual responsibility between citizens and public officials for service outcomes, recast citizens not just as evaluators but also as learners and contributors, and redefined accountability as a function of both government performance and investment in citizen capacities. In her view, the significance of co-production lay not only in recognizing the empirical reality that many services are jointly produced, but also in tempering adversarial citizen-state relations and opening up space for cooperation. As Ostrom (1996, 1073) later stated, *"rather than clients being acted upon, co-production implies that citizens can play an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them."*

In this sense, co-production was not only an empirical observation – many services depend on citizens' inputs – but a normative aspiration to recognize and strengthen citizens' active role in governance, providing an alternative to then-dominant ideas on public service provision and citizen-state relationships.

2.1.3 From a road less travelled to a magic concept

While co-production was a hot topic in public administration between the late 1970s and early 1980s, interest waned among scholars and practitioners from the mid-1980s until the late 1990s. Other alternative modes of public service provision, based on NPM (Hood 1991), gained traction, leaving the concept of co-production in the shadow of attention. As Alford (1998, 128) noted, several alternatives to ideas about public service provision emerged from the 1970s onward. However, *“whereas privatization and contracting out have been enthusiastically adopted by governments around the world, co-production has attracted little official interest after the initial flurry”* and remained *“a road less travelled”* (128-9; also see Brudney 2019).

As the limitations of NPM became increasingly clear (e.g., Hood 1991; Smith and Lipsky 1993), the search for alternative paradigms was reinvigorated. Initially, the primary focus was on concepts such as network governance and interorganizational collaboration (e.g., Klijn and Koppenjan 2000), but research on co-production also revived (Ostrom 1996; Alford 1998, 2002; Pestoff 2006). Alford (1998) advocated building on the concept of client co-production – based on the recognition of the necessity of client contributions to public service outcomes due to interdependence between service providers and users – as another approach to governing: *“This suggests a broader conception of government (...) also as organizer, enabler, and catalyst of the efforts of individuals or groups. It also suggests a more intricate notion of citizenship – not only as voting, exercising rights, and taking part in public deliberation, but also assisting in the production of public services”* (135). Around the same time, Ostrom (1996) used co-production to challenge the conceptual divide that practitioners and scholars seemed to draw between state and market, government and civil society, between public officials and citizens. Instead, she argued that public services often depend on complementarities between citizen and government inputs, rather than being produced by one side alone. For many public services to be effective, neither pure market nor state arrangements suffice; community activation is required.

This time, attention did surge among academics and practitioners (e.g., Palumbo and Manesh, 2023, 1354). Co-production became one of the buzzwords of public administration. It was framed as an integral element of New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne 2006, 2009) and as compatible with the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) (Pollitt

and Bouckaert 2017, 221-222), both of which emphasize more interactive, citizen-oriented forms of governance. Bovaird (2007, 846) called co-production an “*emerging paradigm*” and “*a revolutionary concept in public service*”, arguing that it has major implications for democratic practices beyond representative government because it places users and communities more centrally in decision-making processes. Like the early co-production paradigm aspirations, authors presented the concept as not merely an empirical observation or an instrument for improving service outcomes, but as a fundamental change in the relationship between citizens and the state (Alford 1998; Osborne 2006; Pestoff 2012; Meijer 2016). Government legitimacy, in this view, is not derived solely from elections but also from incorporating citizen and civil society inputs into service delivery.

As the concept spread, its boundaries became increasingly blurred. Co-production turned into a *magic concept* – intuitively attractive to both practitioners and academics, promising multiple benefits (democratic legitimacy, effectiveness, efficiency), yet difficult to pin down and operationalize (Voorberg et al. 2015; Dudau et al. 2019, 1577; also see Pollitt and Hupe 2011). In other words, it was useful for capturing attention and directing debates, but less suitable as an academic topic that aims to cumulate generalizable knowledge, which depends on clearly demarcated boundaries for comparison and theory-building (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; 2018; Jo and Nabatchi 2016, 1105; Nabatchi et al. 2017, 766). The next part delves into this discussion on defining co-production.

2.2 Conceptualizing co-production

Since its introduction, scholars have debated which practices should be considered co-production (e.g., Whitaker 1980; Parks et al. 1981; Percy 1984). In the current literature, roughly two approaches exist. The first treats co-production as an umbrella term covering activities throughout the service cycle (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Jo and Nabatchi 2016; Nabatchi et al. 2017). This approach adjusts to the practical reality of the empirical diversity of the phenomena studied in the literature, and capitalizes on the broadness of the concept, yet it risks conflating distinct practices (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Jo and Nabatchi 2016, 1104-5). The second favors narrower definitions to safeguard comparability, focusing specifically on a relationship between citizens and service providers (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; 2018; Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019; Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 38). This approach tightens the empirical scope of the concept, in favor of precision. What binds both approaches, however, is the recognition of the importance of clearly argued definitions of co-production, as

unclear definitions hinder the cumulative effect of co-production research. As Ansell and Torfing note, *“the persistent stretching of the co-production concept (...) to cover an ever-wider range of activities and actors calls for a clearer conceptual distinction (...) to enhance analytical precision and facilitate empirical comparison”* (2021a, 215).

This dissertation follows the second approach. Co-production is defined here as *a dyadic relationship between public service provider(s) and (a group of) service user(s), in which the user(s) contribute directly and actively to the planning, design, and/or delivery of public services* (based on Brandsen and Honingh 2016, 431; also see Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b).

To discuss what the definition in this dissertation entails and why I adopt it, I elaborate on it along three dimensions: *who* participates, *what* counts as co-production, and *when* in the service cycle it occurs (Nabatchi et al. 2017). Following this, I delineate co-production from two related concepts, co-creation and citizen participation, to arrive at this definition.

2.2.1 The who, what, and when of co-production

Who

Co-production is a dyadic relationship between state actors and lay actors (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Nabatchi et al. 2017; Ansell and Torfing 2021a). In the co-production of *public* services, state actors are always involved, referring to the regular providers of state-sanctioned services – such as teachers, doctors, social workers, or other employees of public service providers (Parks et al. 1981; Ostrom 1996). Lay actors are citizens or clients who use those services (Nabatchi et al. 2017). They must be part of the production process itself: in Ostrom’s classic formulation, they take *“an active role in producing public goods and services of consequence to them”* (1996, 1073).

This view implies clear boundaries. Interorganizational collaboration falls outside co-production and is better captured by terms such as collaborative governance or co-management (Pestoff and Brandsen 2006; Ansell and Gash 2008; Ansell and Torfing 2021). Likewise, activities in which lay actors contribute to services from which they are not themselves the beneficiaries – for instance, serving food in a homeless shelter – are better understood as volunteering than as co-production. The fact that, in such cases, people do not use the services themselves creates a fundamentally different dynamic from that in co-production.

Building on this, we can distinguish two main types of co-production: individual and group co-production (Nabatchi et al. 2017, see also Brudney and England 1983). Individual co-production refers to an individual user working together with a service provider. Group co-production refers to a relationship between a service provider and multiple service users (Nabatchi et al., 2017).³

What

The second dimension concerns the type of activities that qualify as co-production. Early studies defined the term quite expansively. Parks et al. (1981, 1002) spoke of “the mixing of co-productive efforts of regular and consumer producers,” which inspired analyses to include phenomena such as self-help, requesting services, mutual adjustment, everyday undirected efforts, and even compliance with rules as forms of co-production (Whitaker 1980; Sharp 1980). Later studies (e.g., Alford 1998) further reinforced this broad view by showing that even mundane behaviors are indispensable for service delivery. Examples such as citizens writing postcodes on letters or filing tax returns illustrate that many public services cannot function without citizen input. His central insight – that “*value cannot be created or delivered unless the client actively contributes*” (1998, 130) – highlighted that even seemingly minor acts are essential.

This expansive interpretation, however, raises analytical concerns. If virtually all forms of client behavior are labeled as co-production, the concept risks losing distinctiveness and comparability (Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Jo and Nabatchi 2016, 1104-5). In response, more recent scholarship has converged on narrower criteria: co-production requires active and intentional contributions by service users, “as opposed to compliant, compelled, or habitual action” (Nabatchi et al. 2017, 770; cf. Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 217).

Therefore, more recent definitions of co-production tend to exclude several categories that have been labeled as co-production:

- *Everyday acts of compliance*: behaviors such as paying taxes or filling in zip codes may be indispensable but are not taken as deliberate efforts to shape services (cf. Alford 1998)

³ Some authors use the term *collective co-production* for cases where citizens and state actors jointly produce services for the wider community rather than for themselves (Brudney and England 1983; Nabatchi, Sancino and Sicilia 2017). As this concept overlaps with citizen participation and does not involve direct service users, it is not considered here.

- *Service requests*: Asking for assistance or triggering services – such as calling the police (Whitaker 1980), requesting municipal non-emergency services (Clark et al. 2013), or filing public complaints (Zhang and Li 2024) – is essential to service functioning but does not itself constitute co-production (Argawal 2013).
- *Independent actions*: Activities like locking your doors to improve safety, exercising for health, or cycling to reduce emissions (Parrado et al. 2013, 91; Alford and Yates 2015) affect public goods and services but tend to constitute undirected behavior, occurring outside of collaborative processes with providers (Warren et al. 1982; Rosentraub and Warren 1987; Pestoff 2006).

At the same time, the line between compliance and contribution is not always clear. Co-production may take place in mandated settings – for example, in child protection services or activation programs – where elements of compulsion exist (Fledderus 2015; Fledderus and Honingh 2016). In such cases, what matters is that lay actors' contributions remain active and intentional, rather than passive or purely coerced (Brandsen and Honingh 2018).

Another debate concerns whether co-production is inherent to all services: “*co-production is an essential and inalienable core component of service delivery: you cannot have (public) service delivery without co-production*” (Osborne and Strokosch 2013, 33). Unlike goods, which can be produced separately from their consumption, services only come into being through the interaction between provider and user, which makes co-production inherent to service provision. While this recognition is valid, it is questionable whether treating all consumer inputs in these services as co-production is analytically valuable, as it risks stretching the concept to encompass all user activities affecting public services.⁴ Therefore, this dissertation takes the view that the activities of lay actors involve *deliberate behaviors directed toward enhancing service quality* (Brudney and England 1983, 62), rather than “*passive clientelism or consumerism*” (Brandsen and Honingh 2018, 11-12). What underlies this approach is a focus on the co-production of services rather than on the co-production of *outcomes* or *value* (McMullin 2018, 41-43; cf. Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Osborne and Strokosch 2013; Loeffler and Bovaird 2021). Outcomes and public value are, of course, the intended results of service delivery, but they are treated here as *consequences* rather than defining elements of co-production.

In this dissertation, therefore, co-production refers to active and direct contributions by lay actors, embedded in the deliberate efforts of state actors to involve them in service

⁴ More recently, Osborne, Nasi, and Powell (2021, 648) denote this phenomenon as co-experience and co-construction instead of co-production.

provision. This focus on co-production as an intentional effort does not mean that there cannot be spontaneous acts of co-production – for instance, individual professionals choosing to involve clients more actively – but the central concern here is the deliberate involvement of lay actors in the work of state actors in producing public services.

When

A point of discussion on co-production concerns its place in the public service cycle. Some adopt a broad view, locating co-production at all stages, including planning, financing, delivery, monitoring, and evaluation (Bovaird 2007; Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Nabatchi et al. 2017). Others emphasize a narrower scope. Brandsen and Honingh (2016; 2018), for example, argue that co-production should primarily involve citizens' involvement in the design and delivery of services.

In this dissertation, I adopt the narrower view, which aligns with classic studies (Whitaker 1980; Sharp 1980). Co-production is understood as primarily concerned with citizen involvement in service provision and policy implementation (cf. Loeffler and Bovaird 2021, 47). At the same time, I do include co-design or co-planning processes *within* service organizations – such as tenant councils, client councils in hospitals (Van Eijk, Steen, and Torenvliet 2019), or resident meetings in shelters – because they directly shape the design and delivery of services that participants themselves use (cf. Brandsen and Honingh 2018).

2.2.2 Delineation from related concepts

To clarify the definitional boundaries of the concept, it can be useful to contrast co-production with two related concepts: co-creation and citizen participation.

Co-production and co-creation

Earlier studies used co-creation and co-production interchangeably. To strengthen conceptual clarity, some authors proposed stage-based distinctions (Voorberg et al. 2015; Brandsen and Honingh 2018). Yet these are inconsistently applied: co-design, for example, is seen as co-creation by Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers (2015) but as co-production by Brandsen and Honingh (2016). In practice, co-planning, co-design, and co-delivery are likely to overlap and may be intertwined. As a result, such distinctions may add limited clarity.

Building on more recent work (Torfing et al. 2019; Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b), I therefore treat co-creation as distinct from co-production. Co-creation refers to multi-actor processes in which public agencies, politicians, firms, NGOs, communities, and/or citizens jointly define problems and design innovative

solutions that generate public value. Co-production, by contrast, remains located within service organizations, where service users and providers work together to plan, design, and deliver services that users themselves consume. Under this interpretation, bodies such as client councils or tenant boards (cf. Brandsen and Honingh 2018) fall under co-production rather than co-creation, since, as discussed above, they are located within service organizations and focus on the services that participants themselves consume.

Co-production and citizen participation

Broader conceptions of co-production also risk blurring it with citizen participation (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Nabatchi et al. 2017). Following early studies on co-production, I see citizen participation as involvement in *policy formulation* and co-production as involvement in *implementation* (Whitaker 1980; Parks et al. 1981). Citizen participation includes activities such as participatory budgeting, public hearings, citizen assemblies, or advisory committees. Co-production, by contrast, begins once policies have been set and concerns the way in which service users collaborate with service providers to fill in the remaining room and choices in implementation.

2.2.3 Overview

In short, the previous discussion brings us to the following definition: co-production refers to a dyadic relationship between public service provider(s) and (a group of) service user(s), in which the user(s) contribute directly and actively to the planning, design, and/or delivery of public services (based on Brandsen and Honingh 2016, 431; also see Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b). On this basis, co-production can be distinguished from related concepts such as co-creation and citizen participation.

Table 2.1 summarizes how co-production is positioned in this dissertation along the three dimensions discussed above – who is involved, what is at stake, and when in the service cycle participation occurs – and contrasts this with co-creation and citizen participation. Co-production primarily concerns public service provision and therefore often takes place within frontline service organizations – such as hospitals, schools, or welfare agencies – where users collaborate with providers around the planning, design, and delivery of services they themselves consume. Citizen participation, by contrast, usually takes place in political and administrative arenas, for instance between citizens and municipal, regional, or national governments, and is geared toward influencing public policy rather than day-to-day service provision. Co-creation, in turn, typically unfolds across organizational and sectoral boundaries in broader governance networks and partnerships, where public agencies, private

actors, civil society organizations, and citizens jointly define problems and develop innovative solutions (cf. Torfing et al. 2019; Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b).

Obviously, such a delineation can never be watertight. In practice, some of these forms of participation will overlap, be hybrid, or evolve. For analytical purposes, however, it is important to delineate what this dissertation considers co-production.

Table 2.1 Comparing co-production with co-creation and citizen participation

	Co-production	Co-creation	Citizen participation
Who	Service users and service providers	Multi-stakeholder: public agencies, private firms, NGOs, community groups, citizens, professionals, politicians	Citizens and government
What	Public services	Define problems, design, and implement innovative solutions	Public policy
When	Planning, design, and delivery	All stages of the policy cycle	Policy formulation
Examples	Personalized services in which the provider and user decide collaboratively on individual service direction Client councils in hospitals Neighborhood watch working together with the police to ensure community safety	Ministries, municipalities, service providers, and people with lived experience developing a national homeless action plan (Rijksoverheid 2022) Innovation networks; Urban climate partnerships	Participatory budgeting Citizen assemblies Public hearings

Table 2.1. above shows how co-production differs from citizen participation and co-creation. Co-production, as used in this dissertation, is thus reserved for arrangements in which service users collaborate directly with professional service providers within service organizations to design and deliver services that they themselves consume, primarily at the delivery stage.

What all three approaches share, however, is the underlying implicit model of the citizen as an individual with the resources, capacities, and the willingness to act as an active partner. But what happens when we apply that model to citizens who may not neatly fit this profile? What becomes of the promise of co-production when its intended participants are citizens in vulnerable positions? This remains an open

question (Park 2020; Van Eijk and Steen 2022, 74; Broadhurst 2024; Gofen et al. 2025). That is what we will explore in the next section.

2.3 Co-production and vulnerable citizens

The inclusion of vulnerable people in co-production has received increasing attention in recent years (e.g., Brandsen, 2021; Broadhurst, 2024). Broadly speaking, two (not mutually exclusive) perspectives exist on the potential of co-production for vulnerable groups: one hopeful, the other cautionary. The optimistic perspective suggests that co-production could play an important role in reducing vulnerability. Since many public (social) services are aimed at vulnerable groups, and co-production has the potential to make these services more effective, inclusive, and democratic, it could improve service quality and empower service users in the process, thereby helping to alleviate their vulnerability beyond the service relationship itself. In contrast, more cautious accounts question the feasibility of such endeavors. I will shortly explore both perspectives in more detail and provide a preliminary assessment of the empirical evidence base for each. First, however, this requires a discussion of the concept of vulnerability itself.

2.3.1 On vulnerability and vulnerable citizens

Despite its widespread use, the concept is rarely defined in a consistent way (K. Brown 2011, p. 314; Virokannas et al. 2020; Numans 2024, 15). This lack of clarity is partly due to the inherently contextual nature of vulnerability: one is always vulnerable *to something* (Goodin 1985, 779; K. Brown et al. 2017, 503), typically to some future harm or suffering (P. Brown 2021; K. Brown 2024).

Before defining vulnerability in this dissertation, though, we should start with a word of caution. Patrick Brown (2022) invites us to unlearn basic assumptions about vulnerability in order to overcome the *“simplistic idea that some people or groups are vulnerable while others are not”* (29). Instead, he argues that vulnerability is situational and contingent: it arises when individuals face demands they cannot easily meet within particular social and political contexts (Ibid., 12). Therefore, vulnerability should be seen as *“neither enduring nor static”* (Ibid., 6). The potential for vulnerability is inherent to everyday social life: the very processes that enable order, solidarity, and trust also open up possibilities for deviance, stigma, and exclusion when social expectations are unmet. While vulnerability is sometimes associated with conditions and structures that carry long-term effects, it can also be incidental.

This inherent aspect does not mean everyone is equally vulnerable; complex intersections of identities and inequalities partly shape it. For example, *“While the way in which trust works makes everyone vulnerable to not being trusted – as we can all (be seen to) break the norms – some of us are far more likely to be trusted than others”* (P. Brown 2021, 19). In this sense, *“structural vulnerabilities compound and complicate one another”* (Ibid., 58). This critical reading of vulnerability invites caution, alerting us to the risks of treating vulnerability as a label applied to fixed individuals or groups, without further attending to structural conditions.

Vulnerability in social services

Several scholars argue that the use of *vulnerability* in policy practice often results in a reductionist understanding of the concept (Fawcett 2009; K. Brown 2011). In a social service context, vulnerability is frequently used as an administrative lens through which risks, costs, and notions of deservingness are framed. Because these risks are rarely distributed evenly, the term becomes appealing to policymakers who must identify, prioritize, and control them (Fawcett 2009). While this operationalization might appear to be technical or neutral, it is deeply normative, as Kate Brown (2022) notes: *“Entwined with decision-makers’ passions for ‘causes’ and ideas about deservedness, vulnerability is ‘operationalized’ on a day-to-day basis when professionals and policymakers are shaping interventions”* (319).

As a policy term with these moral implications, vulnerability can serve a dual and often contradictory function. On the one hand, it can appeal to societal responsibility, identifying groups at risk of being overlooked and justifying social action to support them (K. Brown 2011, 49). For example, vulnerable citizens may be entitled to specialized programs, preventive interventions, or prioritization in service allocation (Fawcett 2009, 474; K. Brown 2024, 288). On the other hand, it can frame societal problems as individual deficiencies rather than structural failures, leading to stigmatization and justifying paternalistic state intervention (K. Brown 2011, 46). As Fawcett (2009) argues, interpretations of vulnerability often stress *“perceived weaknesses rather than strengths”* and *“imply dependency, passivity, and the need for assistance rather than self-determination”* (474). For instance, Numans (2024, 11) argues that in the Dutch social policy context, citizens are seen as vulnerable when they *“do not or insufficiently meet the societal standard of self-reliance and social participation.”*

Labeling people as vulnerable, or not, is consequential – and the concept should be used with caution (K. Brown 2011). Assigning the label to people is potentially harmful, stigmatizing, and infantilizing. Conversely, failing to recognize vulnerability where support is needed may be just as problematic. The term vulnerability can deflect

attention from structural causes toward individual deficiencies, but it can also justify social support and the investment of resources. It can be used both to assign responsibility to groups of people and to absolve individuals of it (K. Brown 2011, 49).

As a policy term, vulnerability is often implicitly connected to entrenched judgments of deservingness (K. Brown 2024, 288). Certain identity groups, circumstances, and behaviors are more readily recognized as vulnerable – and therefore deserving of support – while others associated with deviance are deemed to blame for their own problems, regardless of actual need (see also Schneider and Ingram 1993). Vulnerability, in this sense, tends to frame how individual problems relate to structural conditions – though *“with tendencies to focus attention on the ‘personal’ face of disadvantage rather than structural dimensions”* (K. Brown 2024, 294). In policy, therefore, vulnerability can function as a moral sorting mechanism that allocates and legitimizes service interventions to some, while denying them to others (K. Brown 2011). At the same time, such notions of vulnerability and deviance are often entangled in concrete policy interventions: *“Those subject to vulnerability interventions are often located in a ‘vulnerability–transgression nexus’ (Brown 2015, 85); socially disadvantaged, disproportionately victimized and at the same time deemed a social problem and controlled often in ways that intensify marginalization and suffering”* (K. Brown 2024, 290). In other words, vulnerable target groups – such as drug users, homeless people, asylum seekers, or sex workers – are framed in policy simultaneously as victims and as responsible for their own situation; deserving of social support, yet also in need of control; vulnerable and a potential threat.

Vulnerability in this dissertation’s context

Given the term’s potential for stigmatization, one might reasonably ask if vulnerability is an appropriate guiding concept for this dissertation. However, aside from its limitations and disclaimers, the term also has an analytical upside that enables generalizations across specific target groups. Whereas concepts like ‘poverty’ or ‘homelessness’ describe specific conditions, vulnerability captures a fundamental relational dynamic between citizens and state actors: a social position rooted in dependency on – and a power imbalance *vis-à-vis* – service providers (Røhnebæk and Bjerck 2021, 749). In this dissertation, I use vulnerability in this narrower, service-relational sense – to use ‘vulnerability’ not to label or reduce individuals to their problems (also see Numans 2024), but as a lens to assess the potential of co-production in settings where citizens depend on services for their very livelihood.

This service-relational position often emerges from concrete challenges that Numans et al. (2021; 2023) describe as a “factual state” of vulnerability. Drawing on the lived

experiences of people in the Netherlands who fall under policy labels of vulnerability, they argue that dependency is frequently rooted in intersecting conditions such as mental illness, physical impairment, and financial hardship (Numans et al. 2021, 10). Importantly, however, these conditions are best understood as common antecedents of dependency – they do not, by themselves, fully explain vulnerability as a social position. In this dissertation, I therefore understand vulnerability as a relational position of dependency on public service providers for basic needs or livelihood, typically grounded in a combination of mental or physical health problems, and/or material deficits (such as financial hardship or housing instability).

Moreover, the manifested *experiences* of vulnerability – frustration, stigma, powerlessness, distrust, and constrained self-determination – are relational and societal in nature. These are often present precisely in encounters with services intended to provide support (Numans et al. 2021, 2023). Service users report limited autonomy, paternalistic attitudes, bureaucratic barriers, distrust, and fragmented or impersonal care (Numans et al. 2023, 36-39). This pattern resonates with the observation that interventions for ‘vulnerable groups’ commonly combine support with elements of social control (K. Brown 2011; 2022). It also aligns with the argument that vulnerability is contingent on the mismatch between situational demands and people’s capacities, rather than an inherent property of particular conditions (K. Brown 2024). Accordingly, while underlying limitations may contribute to vulnerability, *“the societal issue of vulnerability cannot be reduced solely to an individual responsibility”* (Numans 2024, 12).

The implication is that vulnerability in social service provision is not only tied to individual limitations or deficits, but also to how support is provided in service delivery. Whereas the experiences described above are often marked by unequal resources and asymmetrical positions between service users and providers, co-production presumes that citizens can shape services as active partners (Ostrom 1996). The question, therefore, is not only whether co-production is desirable in such contexts, but above all how it can be realized without existing dynamics of dependency and power undermining its ambitions. In other words, vulnerability is a dynamic that co-production must actively navigate. Against this background, the next section develops two perspectives: a hopeful and a more cautionary reading of co-production with vulnerable citizens.

2.3.2 Co-production and vulnerable groups

There are broadly two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, perspectives on the potential of co-production with vulnerable citizens: one optimistic, the other cautionary. I will

first present the optimistic perspective, then the cautionary one, and subsequently take stock of the balance between them based on the co-production literature.

The potential

An optimistic narrative on co-production with vulnerable groups would go something like this. While traditional forms of participation often struggle to engage vulnerable citizens, co-production may be both more accessible and more appealing. It focuses on services that are directly relevant to people's daily lives; it often emphasizes doing rather than (only) deliberating; it addresses issues where concrete experiential knowledge is of clear value; and it takes place close to people's own life (Brandsen 2021, 540-541).

Moreover, many social services – such as debt counselling, homelessness support, or job reintegration programs for the long-term unemployed – are designed for vulnerable citizens. The goal of such services is typically to help users cope with, reduce, or overcome these deficits. If co-production can indeed enhance the effectiveness of public services, as is often assumed (Acar et al. 2025), it could therefore help reduce vulnerability and dependence once services succeed. Beyond effectiveness, co-production aims to empower service users throughout the service process. It tends to grant citizens greater control over the services they use (Brandsen and Honingh 2016, 429) and positions them not as passive or dependent recipients but as active agents capable of mobilizing their own resources to improve their situation (Palumbo 2016; Reinhoudt-den Boer et al. 2021, 2). Because clients themselves are believed to be best placed to identify their problems and needs, co-production can lead to more integrated and responsive service provision. This not only promises better service outcomes but may also reduce the experience of societal vulnerability in the service encounter itself.

Concrete examples illustrate this potential. Van Dijck and Steen (2024) describe a co-production initiative with single mothers living in poverty, in which participants, rather than social workers, set the agenda. This process “*resulted in radically different priorities, such as a workshop on removing lice from toddlers and a group meeting with a lawyer on how to get alimony from reluctant ex-partners*” (2248–2249). In other words, co-production can foster ownership and empowerment, replacing feelings of powerlessness with a sense of agency and control. Lindsay et al. (2018) provide a similar example of personalized approaches to support long-term unemployed single parents with complex needs. Service users in this study “*unanimously described these relationships as empowering and, crucially, rooted in a sense of choice and control*” (327).

In short, an optimistic perspective would argue that these examples suggest that co-production is not merely another form of participation that is *also* accessible to vulnerable citizens, but perhaps a method that is *especially* suited to them.

Cautionary tales

A more cautionary perspective raises questions about the potential of co-production with vulnerable groups. This view argues that the noble intentions of co-production risk crashing against the hard realities of power differentials and dependency that characterize the relationship between vulnerable citizens and service providers. Three major risks stand out.

First is the problem of unequal participation and the exacerbation of existing inequalities. Co-production demands resources like time, skills, and confidence, which vulnerable citizens may possess in shorter supply. This may hamper their ability to participate (e.g., Carminati et al. 2023, 872). If co-production improves services, this leads some authors to fear that co-production may “*exacerbate gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes*” (Rosentraub and Sharp 1981, 517; also see: Van de Bovenkamp 2010; Steen, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2018; Cornips et al. 2023).

Second, even when vulnerable citizens are involved, it is debatable whether their participation results in a genuine shift in power. Organizational ambitions for co-production may remain a ceremonial act rather than a transfer of real influence (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Park (2020, 458) argues that efforts for user involvement “*are often nominal and tokenized processes*.” Service providers may especially see vulnerable service users as incapable of participating, echoing Kate Brown’s (2011) summary that they are often seen as incapable of voicing their own wishes and that “*they do not know what is best for them and require protection*” (316). In a similar vein, Van de Wetering (2024) concludes in an ethnographic study on participatory governance in vulnerable neighborhoods that: “*While a shift toward participatory approaches (...) might be discursively present, practiced reality may be different*” (515).

Fledderus’ (2015) study on co-production in work corporations serves as another example of this. Participants in the work corporations could carry out basic tasks (for a small financial reimbursement) but had limited influence on their work or personal development, let alone organizational policies. Rather than creating real empowerment, about a third of the respondents believed “*that the work corporation primarily exists for the sake of the owners of the work corporation or municipality, and/or said they are being used as cheap employees*” (559) – and some even perceived the program as punitive. In such cases, co-production may further create the very experiences of

(societal) vulnerability that it often aims to alleviate. Indeed, as Broadhurst (2023) concludes in her review on co-production with vulnerable groups: “service users continue to experience a ‘provider knows best’ approach” (271).

Finally, the ambition of co-production may fail to align with the needs and values of vulnerable citizens themselves. The policy ideal of an empowered, self-reliant, and participating citizen can clash with the lived reality of individuals in highly precarious situations. Research by Reinhoudt-den Boer, Huijsman, and Van Wijngaarden (2021) suggests that policymakers’ aspirations do not always resonate with those of clients. Citizens facing highly complex problems may expect service providers to solve their problems for them; they may have a deep-seated distrust of frontline workers; and they may have different conceptions of their problems than policymakers. As a result, clients may not be inclined to see co-production as a viable option. The authors conclude: “Noble ideas of emancipation and client centeredness (...) do not always resonate with (or even ignore) clients’ values” (7).

In sum, the cautionary perspective warns that without careful attention to these pitfalls, co-production risks reinforcing inequalities, producing only superficial participation, and failing to align with clients’ needs. In the worst case, co-production ambitions may shift the responsibility for societal problems to already disadvantaged citizens (Steen, Brandsen, and Verschuere 2018; Torfing et al. 2019; McMullin 2024b). The relation between co-production and vulnerability is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, co-production represents an effort to challenge vulnerability; on the other hand, vulnerability may constrain how co-production unfolds (Røhnebak and Bjerck 2021, 742). For instance, the lack of resources and capacities, a mutual distrust, and unequal power relations may hamper co-production.

All in all, empirically, we still know relatively little about co-production with vulnerable citizens (Brandsen 2021, 533; Broadhurst 2024, 270). While a growing body of research on the involvement of vulnerable groups in co-production (e.g., Jakobsen and Andersen 2013; Fledderus 2015; Hand 2018; Cullingworth et al. 2024; Larsen and Caswell 2022; Vanleene et al. 2018; Stougaard 2021) suggests that there is ample potential for the inclusion of vulnerable groups, upon closer inspection, there appear to be few cases where the ambitions surrounding co-production seem to have been realized. At the same time, some examples show that these initiatives can work. This suggests that co-production with vulnerable citizens is attainable, but implementing it in a way that aligns with its aspirations is not straightforward.

Until now, I have mainly emphasized the citizen-side of co-production, particularly how vulnerability shapes participation and experiences in service encounters. Yet co-production is inherently relational. To understand how co-production is enacted in practice – and why ambitions are sometimes realized and sometimes not – we must also examine the service provider-side. A complementary body of work that helps explain these implementation dynamics is the street-level bureaucracy literature, to which I now turn (Lipsky 2010).

2.4 The street-level situation: three narratives

Previously, I conceptualized co-production as a form of relational service provision that takes shape in encounters at the frontline of service provision, between citizens and service workers. To assess the potential for co-production, we therefore need to understand the circumstances in which these frontline workers – police officers, social workers, teachers – operate. Lipsky (2010) described these workers as street-level bureaucrats: *“public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work”* (2010, 3). Their actions are of systemic importance, for *“the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out”* (Lipsky 2010, xiii). This makes frontline workers not just important faces of the state (Zacka 2017; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022), but also critical to how the state functions in practice (Lipsky 2010). In what follows, I first sketch the core ideas of the street-level bureaucracy literature and then discuss three narratives that have been developed within this tradition, and, next, assess the perspective each narrative offers for co-production.

2.4.1 The street-level predicament

A basic premise of virtually all street-level bureaucracy literature concerns the nature of frontline work. Street-level bureaucrats interact with citizens and make decisions about them that can have major effects on their life chances (e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2023, 107-110). They have considerable discretion in their work, for a range of reasons, such as: policy goals are often ambiguous, different goals and values may conflict with one another, resources are limited, there is considerable uncertainty and unpredictability, decisions are frequently based on “soft” evidence rather than hard data, ends and means are often entangled, and there are structural information asymmetries between frontline workers and their supervisors (Zacka 2017).

The working environment of street-level bureaucrats is often far from enviable (Lipsky 2010). They operate under chronic conditions of resource scarcity, uncertainty, and conflicting demands. They must navigate their dual roles as professionals and bureaucrats, facing time pressure, inadequate resources, and vague, sometimes contradictory, goals (Lipsky 1971). The result is a working context marked by ambivalence and contradiction: workers are expected to be responsive to clients, organizations, and society at large; to uphold rules while exercising discretion; and to provide equal treatment while also responding to individual needs (Lipsky 2010, 229). Street-level work therefore consists of a delicate balancing act, carried out in the awareness that fully reconciling these competing demands is impossible (Zacka 2017).

2.4.2 Three narratives of frontline discretion

A large part of the street-level bureaucracy literature then turns to the question of how, and on what basis, street-level bureaucrats use their discretion (Møller et al. 2022, 153). Over the years, several complementary answers have emerged. These can be summarized under the labels of the *state-agent narrative*, the *citizen-agent narrative*, and the *knowledge-agent narrative*.

The first narrative, coined the state-agent narrative by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2022), is the most prevalent in the early street-level bureaucracy literature, with Lipsky as its main exponent here.⁵ This perspective sees street-level bureaucrats primarily as actors who implement policy. As Rice (2012) notes, Lipsky's analysis implicitly adopts a rational-choice institutionalist view in which frontline workers appear to act mainly in their own interest and in the interest of the organization, while also being guided by their intrinsic values. In the state-agent perspective – similar to what others call the compliance model (Brodkin 2008; Zacka 2017, 36-37) – discretion is inescapable but is generally seen as potentially dangerous to administrative values such as democracy and accountability (also see Evans and Hupe 2020, 7). Departures from policy are interpreted as negative and as a potential threat to those values. This is not surprising, since much of this literature starts from the assumption that frontline workers use their discretion mainly to serve self-interest and organizational convenience, to make their work easier, more manageable, and more rewarding (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2023, 12).

The state-agent narrative has several characteristic features. It portrays frontline workers primarily as officials charged with implementing policy on behalf of the state. Their orientation is toward policies, rules, and administrative procedures. Faced with

⁵ Nevertheless, while the state-agent narrative is the most dominant in Lipsky's (2010) analysis, it also contains elements of the citizen-agent and knowledge-agent narratives.

the structural pressures of their work, street-level bureaucrats engage in coping, understood as the *“behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis”* (Tummers et al. 2015, 1100; also see Folkman and Lazarus 1980). In the state-agent narrative, pressures drive frontline workers to routinize tasks, ration services, and control or delegitimize client demands (Lipsky 2010). Once routinized, coping strategies can become so widespread that the ways in which implementers use discretion practically become policy (Lipsky 2010; Brodtkin 2011). Discretionary acts may even conflict with policy goals and undermine them – although, as Lipsky (2010, xviii) notes, they may also bridge the gap between ambitions and street-level reality. Coping strategies emerge as satisficing responses to impossible job demands, often prioritizing making work manageable and defensible, and organizational survival, over the ideals of client-centered service. Nevertheless, workers may sometimes go to great lengths to help clients, but the structural conditions of frontline work do not allow them to do so for all clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022, 12).

Alongside this then-dominant perspective, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2002, 2022) develop a second, *citizen-agent* narrative. Drawing on street-level workers' personal stories, they show that frontline workers tend to describe themselves as pragmatic actors who respond to particular citizens and situations, rather than policy implementors. In this narrative, frontline workers portray their decisions as grounded in their judgments about individual clients, rather than as the implementation of abstract policy. Frontline stories show that street-level workers use discretion not just to ration or control, but also to support, enable, or advocate for clients – sometimes even when such actions deviate from organizational routines or risk conflict with superiors. They make situational judgments about the perceived worthiness of individual clients and may go above and beyond to “move toward” those they regard as deserving (Tummers et al. 2015). At the same time, their moral judgments may also lead them to punish or to adopt a rigidly rule-following approach toward others they deem undeserving. The point of the citizen-agent narrative is therefore not that frontline workers always act in the citizen's best interests, but that their use of discretion is based on pragmatic moral judgments about what the citizen deserves, rather than on reasoning from rules and policy primarily (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022, 185). Workers present their decisions as pragmatic responses to what they see as right for specific citizens and are sometimes willing to make their work harder, more unpleasant, or less successful in organizational terms in order to do so. Instead of serving as agents of the state, they often see themselves as working in opposition to, or in spite of, ‘the system’ which they often perceive as out of touch with frontline realities.

A third, more recent narrative is the *knowledge-agent* narrative (Cecchini and Harrits 2022; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). This perspective emphasizes that frontline workers often base their use of discretion on the knowledge base they claim to possess. That knowledge base can be their professional background: although the strength of professional identities differs across occupations and contexts, many street-level bureaucrats are professionally trained. In this sense, the knowledge-agent perspective gives more weight to the professional role of street-level bureaucrats, which Lipsky also noted when he argued that the fundamental dilemma of street-level bureaucrats arises from their dual role as bureaucrats and professionals, each bringing different demands (Lipsky 2010, 190; also see Evans 2015). In addition, frontline workers draw on practical, experience-based knowledge accumulated in their everyday work (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). The legitimacy of this knowledge does not lie so much in formal professional norms as in practical wisdom or street smarts. From a knowledge-agent perspective, discretion is therefore closely tied to claims of expertise – whether rooted in formal training or in practical experience.

These narratives should be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. As Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) point out, frontline workers may see themselves primarily as citizen agents, but that does not mean they cease to function as state agents – it is precisely their position as representatives of the state that enables them to make consequential decisions about citizens. More recent work therefore treats these narratives as akin to institutional logics (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022, 184-185). Without going into the institutional logics approach in detail, this means that frontline workers' beliefs and actions can be guided by different narratives (or multiple at once), each grounded in distinct sources of legitimacy and authority, and each directing their attention in particular ways (see e.g., Thornton et al. 2012; McPherson and Sauder 2013). In this view, institutional logics are culturally embedded organizing principles that shape what actors see as legitimate goals, appropriate means, and relevant issues in a given situation.

In this sense, the three narratives can be understood as distinct logics on which frontline workers may draw when exercising discretion (Cecchini and Harrits 2022; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022) and, expectedly, each narrative will hold a different salience – or centrality (Stevenson 2025) – for different workers and

contexts (also see Zacka 2017).⁶ These logics are embedded in practices and shared meanings that focus attention: *“They guide what workers see and overlook. They define what is viewed as a problem and how workers should respond appropriately”* (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022, 184-185). Therefore, narratives also *“define how workers relate to and value the members of the governed publics they encounter”* (185).

From this perspective, *“exercising discretion stands for balancing action prescriptions stemming from various sources”* (Evans and Hupe 2020, 7), and each narrative contains certain prescriptions, based on different sources. This makes exercising discretion into a matter of agency, rather than of coping (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012; Evans 2015; Visser and Kruyen 2021; Visser 2024, 255). Cecchini and Harrits (2022) illustrate this by showing how, in the state-agent narrative, frontline workers are oriented primarily toward legal compliance and formal procedures; in the citizen-agent narrative, toward social norms, ideas of fairness, and clients’ perceived worthiness; and in the knowledge-agent narrative, toward professional and experiential standards of ‘what works’ in solving problems.

These three narratives help to understand how frontline workers perceive their role and use their discretionary space. The next section shifts the focus from narratives about frontline work to the question of how co-production with vulnerable citizens might (or might not) fit within these street-level narratives.

2.4.3 Co-production through the lens of the three narratives

Co-production, as defined earlier, implies shared responsibility between service providers and users. It presupposes recognition of the value of the client perspective, some degree of mutual trust, and a transfer of at least some power or influence to service users (e.g., Bovaird 2007, 855-856). Seen through the three narratives of frontline work outlined above, however, the potential for co-production in contexts with vulnerable citizens is far from straightforward. From the three *perspectives* on street-level work – frontline workers as state-agents, citizen-agents, and as knowledge agents – the potential for co-production seems rather small in contexts with vulnerable groups. I explain this position below.

⁶ While Stevenson (2025) focuses on how actors relate to institutional logics, Zacka offers a more internal, psychological–moral perspective. In a similar vein, however, Stevenson (2025) argues that different institutional logics have varying levels of salience or “centrality” for actors, whereas Zacka (2017) suggests that street-level workers hold different role conceptions or moral dispositions that shape how they understand their role and how they behave in interactions with clients.

From a traditional, state-agent perspective, the challenging conditions faced by organizations and frontline workers leave little room for co-production, let alone with vulnerable citizens. Lipsky (2010, 95) repeatedly argues that the poorest people are often those who can expect the least from street-level organizations. Service providers have few extrinsic incentives to become more responsive to clients, because there is never a shortage of demand for services. Moreover, the fact that clients often make use of services involuntarily indicates that street-level bureaucrats hold significant power over them: *“the poorer people are, the greater the influence that street-level bureaucrats tend to have over them”* (Lipsky 2010, 6; also see Hasenfeld 2010, 24). Generally, they have little to lose by failing to address clients’ needs adequately: clients are rarely the only or primary constituency for organizations, and the more disadvantaged clients are, the fewer incentives workers have to be responsive to them (Lipsky 2010, 55). Policies and organizations may (possibly unintentionally) encourage bureaucrats to help those who are most easily helped, rather than those in the direst need (Brodkin 2011). In the worst case, social service providers may become a source of humiliation rather than help. People who depend on public assistance may have to jump through countless hoops to obtain the aid to which they are legally entitled – if they receive it at all (e.g., Lipsky 2010, 93; Brodkin 2011, 266-267).

Although frontline workers *“often want to make an improvement in their clients’ lives”* (Lipsky 2010, 105), a state-agent perspective expects that structural conditions offer limited scope and incentive for providing high-quality, responsive services (Brodkin 1997, 24; Larsen and Caswell 2021, 62). As Lipsky argues, *“stated intentions of street-level bureaucracies to become more client-oriented, to receive more citizen input, and to encourage clients to speak out are often questionable”* (2010, 101), and *“proposals for greater client autonomy generally suffer from the fact that clients tend to remain relatively powerless”* (193). Lipsky therefore remained skeptical that stated ambitions to enhance client autonomy and voice will substantially alter the powerlessness of most clients.

From a state-agent narrative, it is therefore not surprising that co-production with vulnerable citizens can result in tokenism. To be clear, this does not mean that co-production cannot exist under such circumstances. It can, but it is doubtful whether it also entails autonomy, responsibility, or empowerment for clients, as it is often presented as an “alternative paradigm” (Sharp 1980). This helps to make sense of the cautionary findings in the co-production literature, where formal involvement mechanisms are introduced but users report limited actual influence or empowerment (e.g., Fledderus 2015).

Though one might expect the citizen-agent narrative to offer a more promising starting point for co-production, this is far from self-evident. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2022) emphasize that street-level workers sometimes go above and beyond to help citizens in ways that clearly exceed organizational expectations and may run against policy imperatives. Yet such efforts are highly selective and grounded in pragmatism and, especially, in moral judgments of citizens' deservingness. In demanding environments – with high caseloads, limited time, and little organizational support – the citizen-agent narrative would therefore lead us to expect frontline workers to regard co-production ambitions as stemming from a system out of touch with the pressing issues clients face and the conditions of frontline work.

Moreover, the citizen-agent narrative does not assume that frontline workers are willing to share power with citizens. On the contrary, Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2022) stories suggest that workers often see their own judgment as superior to that of others. As they note, workers frequently believe that they know better than clients what is realistic and appropriate and *“are fully comfortable with their paternalism and show no hesitancy in redirecting their clients' lives, even against the wishes of people who have much stronger bonds to the clients”* (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022, 129). Citizen-agency, in this sense, does not automatically translate into space for co-production; it remains centered on the frontline worker as the ultimate arbiter of what is right for the client. For vulnerable citizens in particular, this implies that any involvement is likely to be conditional, selective, and similar to a paternalistic ‘provider-knows best’ approach – even when co-production is aspired (Broadhurst 2024).

Finally, the knowledge-agent narrative also does not straightforwardly offer more room for co-production. On the one hand, an emphasis on professional and experiential knowledge could, in principle, create space for recognizing users' lived experience as a relevant form of expertise and for involving them more actively in shaping services. On the other hand, it may result in a similar provider-knows best approach as previously mentioned. In fact, Cecchini and Harrits (2022, 54) explicitly warn that the professional-agent narrative carries the shadow side of a *“tendency to disregard the wishes and insights of citizen clients vis-à-vis expert knowledge.”* From this perspective too, there is no automatic move toward co-production: claims of knowledge may underpin efforts to collaborate with citizens, but they may equally be used to override or sideline client perspectives that are seen as insufficiently informed, realistic, or evidence-based (see also Park 2020).

In sum, each narrative offers a logic that frontline workers may invoke when using discretion, none of which will naturally guide them toward co-production. However,

as I will discuss next, recent changes in policy, society, and professional contexts may have made all narratives more conducive to co-production than the preceding discussion suggests.

2.4.4 Changing contexts: Reconciling traditional street-level observations with current co-production aspirations

The preceding discussion painted a sobering picture: from a traditional view of street-level bureaucracy, the structural constraints of frontline work leave little room for co-production – especially with vulnerable citizens. And the citizen-agent and knowledge-agent perspectives do not provide much more perspective. However, as Sharp (1980, 118) already noted: *“It should be noted that the kinds of defensive street-level bureaucratic behaviors Lipsky outlines are linked to a working milieu characterized by resource constraints and threats to the legitimacy of the street-level bureaucrat.”* Indeed, what binds the street-level bureaucracy literature is the assumption that the structural conditions in which frontline workers operate have a large effect on how services are delivered. Under circumstances of high client demand, power differences between workers and citizens, and insufficient resources, services are unlikely to resemble co-production ideals. In other words, we should expect the potential for co-production for *all* narratives to depend on their context. And this may be more conducive to co-production today than the previous discussion suggests.

First, much of the street-level bureaucracy literature that describes highly constrained, disciplinary frontline service provision with little room for co-production, is based on a U.S. context where welfare services are often focused on the compliance and sanctioning of service users (Brodkin 2011; Soss et al. 2011; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012, S22). In other settings, frontline workers may behave otherwise (Lipsky 2010; Durose 2011; Rice 2019), especially when they are expected to use their discretion to create public value, reach out to marginalized groups, and collaborate across organizational boundaries (Bartels 2013; Larsen and Van Gestel 2013; Larsen et al. 2025). In many Western European countries, contemporary governance paradigms such as NPG and the Neo-Weberian State emphasize collaboration and user involvement (Osborne 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Discretion and public encounters are increasingly seen as potential assets rather than merely a necessary but inconvenient feature of service delivery (Bartels 2013, 473). Recent research in such contexts applies relational approaches to service provision (Van Gestel et al. 2019). These studies show that frontline workers can have the flexibility to reach out to disadvantaged groups and reinterpret rules to fit local needs (Durose 2011). Many frontline workers now deliver services that aim to be co-produced (Steen and Tuurnas 2018) and, likewise, their ways of using discretion may

increasingly align with co-production, such as involving users through deliberation, empowerment, negotiation, or rapport-building (Edri-Peer and Cohen 2025).

In other words, structural circumstances may now be more conducive for frontline workers to implement co-production – across all three narratives. Public policies and organizational strategies increasingly aspire to co-production, making it more likely from a state-agent perspective. Cultural norms have shifted in favor of user involvement, making co-production more plausible from a citizen-agent perspective. Co-production could also be increasingly embedded in professional norms. For instance, professional methods and guidelines increasingly tend to emphasize the importance of facilitating self-direction for service users (e.g., Richtlijnen Jeugdhulp; Wolf and Jonker 2021). This could make frontline workers into proponents of co-production, rather than seeing it as a potential threat, making co-production more likely from a knowledge-agent perspective (also see Tuurnas 2021; Brandsen et al. 2024).

This does not mean that implementing co-production will be easy or automatic, even when it may be more likely. Some of the structural dilemmas the street-level bureaucracy literature identified are inherent to frontline work. User wishes will not always coincide with professional norms, policy, or frontline workers' perceptions of fairness; service providers work with limited resources; and under uncertainty and conflicting demands, there will always be trade-offs between different service values. Even if policymakers, managers, and street-level bureaucrats today are more in favor of co-production, such ambitions will be short-lived in the most challenging circumstances.

This potential gap between aspiration and practice can be visualized as a continuum (Table 2.2). On one end lie the classic observations on street-level interactions with vulnerable groups; on the other, the ideals of co-production. While ever more service providers commit to co-production aspirations, structural constraints might still push the general practice of implementation toward traditional street-level observations. Without accounting for structural constraints, even well-intentioned efforts risk reproducing the dynamics they aim to overcome.

Table 2.2 Two ideal types of service provision: classic street-level observations vs co-production ideals

	Traditional street-level observations	Co-production ideals
'Vulnerable' client image	Powerless	Essential for success
User role	Passive client	Active co-producer
Worker-client relations	Directive; paternalistic	Collaborative
Expected strategies to deal with (vulnerable) clients	Rationing services, delegitimizing demand, creaming, and controlling clients;	Reaching out, empowering, enabling, collaborating
Expected service experiences of vulnerable users	Societal vulnerability: stigmatization, paternalization, objectification	Empowerment, inclusion, self-direction

In other words, co-production unfolds within the structural constraints identified by literature on street-level bureaucracy, and we should therefore take such insights seriously. The question, then, is what it takes for co-production to succeed under street-level conditions, particularly for vulnerable citizens.

Chapter overview

This chapter has shown how co-production emerged as a concept describing how service users and providers collaboratively shape services. It carries an aspirational tone, tied to ideals of greater effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness, and empowerment. Like related ideas such as co-creation and citizen participation, it often assumes a citizen who is willing and able to participate. Many public services, however, are aimed at people who do not easily fit this image – vulnerable citizens. I argued that, rather than treating vulnerability as a fixed property of specific groups, it is more useful to see it as situational and relational: a position of dependency on public service providers for basic needs or livelihood, typically grounded in a combination of mental or physical health problems, and/or material deficits such as financial hardship or housing instability (Numans et al. 2021). Negative experiences of vulnerability – powerlessness, stigmatization, and constrained self-determination – often arise in encounters with social services themselves (Numans et al. 2023). This highlights a central tension: services designed to reduce vulnerability may at the same time reproduce it. Co-production, with its promise of empowerment, user ownership, and inclusion, might offer a potential alternative in this respect. Empirically, however, we still know relatively little about what it can achieve in such contexts. While some examples suggest that it can work, others show that it may fall short of its own ideals.

To better understand the service provider side of co-production, I introduced the literature on street-level bureaucracy and discussed three narratives – state-agent, citizen-agent, and knowledge-agent – as distinct logics through which frontline workers make sense of their role and use discretion. None of these is, in itself, conducive to co-production with vulnerable citizens, even if recent developments may have made frontline workers more receptive to co-production. At the same time, the structural constraints of frontline work continue to limit what is possible in practice, especially in services aimed at vulnerable groups.

The central puzzle that follows is therefore, not whether vulnerable citizens are suitable partners for co-production, but under which conditions street-level practices of co-production can move closer to the ideals. The next chapter develops an analytical framework that specifies these conditions and guides the empirical analysis in the remainder of the dissertation.



Chapter 3.

Analytical framework

In the previous chapter, I argued that whether co-production with vulnerable groups is successful depends on the conditions under which such service delivery takes place. This chapter further develops that argument by presenting the analytical framework of this dissertation. Further specifying the second sub-question of this dissertation, the central question that guides this chapter is: *How can we theoretically conceptualize co-production success, and under which theoretical conditions can we expect co-production with vulnerable citizens to succeed?*

The framework consists of two elements. In the first part, I provide an operational definition of co-production success and present a framework to analyze it. The second part of the framework explores conditions that may enable successful co-production, based on previous empirical studies. These conditions operate across four levels: (1) the participant group, (2) the co-production program structure, (3) frontline work, and (4) organizational conditions, including their interaction with the wider institutional environment. Together, these two parts of the framework make it possible both to compare co-production programs and to understand the conditions under which they are successfully implemented.⁷

3.1 Defining and analyzing the success of co-production

3.1.1 When is co-production successful?

To answer this chapter's sub-question, we first need to clarify what constitutes success in co-production. While the success of co-production is often only implicitly addressed in the literature, previous studies nonetheless offer two legitimate options to analyze it.

A first option is to focus on a specific outcome of co-production that is generally expected for participants, such as increased trust, and assess whether a specific co-production initiative contributes to that effect (e.g., Fledderus 2015). This approach has the advantage of analytical focus and clear operationalization, but it also risks imposing theoretical expectations on initiatives that may not have prioritized such outcomes in their own program theory. Consequently, evaluating success solely through theoretical expectations may fail to capture whether an initiative is actually functioning as intended on its own terms.

⁷ This framework, as will be explained in Chapter 4, was developed in an abductive iteration between theory and empirical observations.

A second option is to evaluate co-production in terms of the broader set of outcomes it generates. This includes approaches that assess whether co-production contributes to better services or enhances public values, drawing on respondents' reported experiences of outcomes impacted by initiatives (e.g., Acar 2025). The strength of this outcome-oriented approach is that it does justice to the multi-dimensional ambitions commonly associated with co-production initiatives.

However, both approaches are less suitable for this dissertation. As Chapter 2 has shown, a recurring issue in co-production with vulnerable citizens is that even basic ambitions can be difficult to realize in day-to-day practice: intended participants are not always reached, initiatives do not always endure, and frontline workers may constrain the transfer of influence and responsibility that co-production presupposes. In other words, before we can reasonably ask about effects or public value outcomes, it is a legitimate question whether co-production gets off the ground at all in the form programs themselves intend.

Against this backdrop, a basic form of success concerns whether co-production is actually enacted as such: whether service users are meaningfully involved and take genuine responsibility and influence in service delivery, in ways that the program itself intended. Accordingly, I operationalize co-production success by using the degree to which a program's day-to-day implementation reflects its stated intentions as an analytical proxy for success. In this dissertation, variation in this alignment – within and between programs – constitutes the main outcome to be explained.

This operational definition, of course, is imperfect as well. Deviations from program intentions are not necessarily failures; they may reflect adaptive practice in response to situational constraints or unforeseen dynamics. Moreover, using alignment as a proxy can make less ambitious co-production efforts appear more successful simply because they face fewer implementation challenges. Alignment between design and practice should therefore not be treated as a strict measure of success, but as a diagnostic analytical lens: it helps identify where and how a co-production effort diverges from its own intentions, and points to where a co-production initiative may fall short of its aspirations.

3.1.2 Analyzing the success of co-production programs: intentions and practice

Conceptualizing success as alignment between intentions and practice requires a systematic way to compare how co-production is designed and implemented. This, in turn, calls for an analytical framework that specifies which aspects of co-production programs are to be compared. To develop such a framework, I build on previous

approaches that conceptualize co-production along five dimensions: the who, when, what, where, and why (Nabatchi et al. 2017; Steiner et al. 2023). However, these existing frameworks are primarily designed for comparative breadth. They are suited for mapping the landscape of co-production across diverse international contexts or within literature reviews (Steiner et al. 2023), but for this dissertation, which seeks to analyze co-production in-depth, such broad typologies are insufficient. I therefore use these frameworks as an inspiration, but recalibrate them to capture the micro-dynamics of co-production. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus specifically on the dimensions that are central to the comparisons in Chapters 6 and 7: *who*, *what*, and *why*. I operationalize these three dimensions to distinguish between co-production as designed (the program's formal intentions) and co-production in practice (the actual implementation). This approach enables an in-depth comparison between different co-production programs and, crucially, it allows me to assess the degree to which the daily practice of co-production actually aligns with its design.

Who

The *who*-dimension captures the actors who are involved in co-production. A basic distinction can be made between service providers (state actors) and service users (lay actors) (Nabatchi et al. 2017). For co-producers, the first subdimension concerns the target group: as designed, programs specify which service users they seek to engage as participants. In practice, however, the actual participants may only represent a subset of this intended group. Especially in contexts involving vulnerable citizens, barriers such as a lack of resources, distrust, or stigma can make it difficult for programs to reach their target population (e.g., Broadhurst 2024). Processes of self-selection or organizational gatekeeping can therefore result in differences between a program's target group and its actual participants (Fledderus and Honingh 2016).

A second subdimension of who is involved in co-production therefore relates to the selection and recruitment mechanisms for reaching this intended target group. Several mechanisms are imaginable here. Some programs may allow all service users to sign up for co-production; others may let only organizational members select people in co-production; and again, others may allow current co-producers to select new participants. Here, as well, the actual use of these mechanisms may differ in practice from their design.

A third subdimension relates to participants' roles in co-production. Some programs may offer different levels of responsibility and involvement, from basic roles to more demanding positions. This role differentiation shapes the tasks and responsibilities

assigned to users and the extent of influence they can have over the organization and delivery of services. In other cases, no such differentiation is made, and all users are simply considered participants with the same formal status.

The fourth subdimension concerns professional actors and roles.⁸ Program designs specify which professionals are expected to be involved – for example, frontline workers, frontline managers, or others – and how their roles relate to those of co-producers. In practice, the mix of professionals and their roles may look different.

Together, these three subdimensions make it possible to compare who is involved in co-production programs, and whether there are differences between intentions and practice.

What

The *what* of co-production usually has two subdimensions, referring both to (i) the type of service being co-produced and (ii) the benefits and value created through the process (Steiner et al. 2023, 507). A type of service may refer to whether the co-production centers on a core task or a complementary task of a service provider (Brandsen and Honingh 2016). And the second subdimension may denote whether the benefits created through co-production are primarily individual or collective (Nabatchi et al. 2017). While this distinction is important, it is not the most feasible way to compare co-production efforts for this dissertation's purposes. First, the intended benefits of a co-production overlap with the *why* dimension of co-production, as discussed later. Second, focusing only on the type of activities – whether they are complementary or substitutive, voluntary or non-voluntary – primarily classifies the service context, but fails to capture the micro-dynamics of co-production itself. Instead, the *what* of co-production is broken down here into three concrete subdimensions: co-producer activities, decision-making powers, and professional activities.

First are the activities of co-producers. Programs may envision participants to fulfill practical tasks (such as cleaning, cooking, or managing the entrance) and organizational responsibilities (such as enforcing rules, conducting intakes, or participating in meetings). In practice, these activities may be taken up more broadly

⁸ I use this term in a broad, descriptive sense to denote the organizational support role (usually paid) rather than the participant role. This avoids debates about professionalism or professionalization. Note that in one co-production program studied empirically, support is also provided by external advisors who may serve in voluntary roles; as discussed in Chapter 6, I refer to them explicitly as such.

or more narrowly than envisaged, and some tasks may shift between participants and professionals.

Second are the decision-making powers embedded in co-production programs. While co-production is focused on doing rather than just talking, co-production efforts *do* generally seek to provide more influence of citizens over their services (Brandsen and Honingh 2016). This subdimension therefore concerns the allocation of formal decision-making powers between participants and professionals – for instance, whom a program formally authorizes to make decisions about admissions, sanctions, daily routines, or strategic changes. These envisioned decision-making powers do not necessarily translate into practice. While it may be that participants' actual influence is limited, it is also imaginable that participants may have *more* influence in practice than designed.

Third are the activities of the professional staff in co-production. This professional staff will often consist of frontline workers, though in some cases, they may also extend to, for instance, frontline managers or organizational management who are involved in a co-production effort. Professional staff can provide individual care and support, carry out administrative and managerial tasks, or assume more directive authority in response to crises or conflicts. In practice, professionals may take on additional roles or, conversely, withdraw from certain tasks – for example, by intervening more directly in conflicts than intended, or by leaving more responsibilities to participants. Comparing planned staff tasks with the tasks professionals actually perform reveals how organizational aspirations for co-production relate to the everyday practices of staff.

Taken together, these three subdimensions make it possible to compare how co-production is formally designed in terms of what participants and professionals do and decide, and how these activities and powers are actually distributed in practice.

Why

The *why* of co-production, as Steiner et al. (2023, 515-516) describe it, primarily concerns the origin story of a co-production program: the main reasons for its emergence and the rationale of its initiators. For the purposes of this dissertation, I unpack this *why* into three related subdimensions, each of which can be examined in terms of program design and practice: (i) the rationale of the program initiators, (ii) embedded incentives, and (iii) benefits.

First, programs rest on a rationale: a set of reasons for initiating co-production rather than more traditional service delivery. This may include, among other things, a wish to cut costs, to empower service users, or as a way to keep a service running when public funds are retracted (Steiner et al. 2023). Such rationales may differ between program initiators and actual implementing frontline workers. In Table 3.1., this is operationalized by contrasting espoused reasons for co-production – as formulated in organizational documents – with the reasons that service-providing staff invoke in their daily practice. This contrast shows which rationales remain central in practice and which recede into the background.

The second aspect of *why* co-production occurs focuses on its participants. As Van Eijk and Steen (2014) and Van Eijk (2017) show, citizens participate for diverse reasons. Analytically, it is important to distinguish between motivations that reside in participants and features of the program that may elicit or support such motivations. This second subdimension of *why* therefore refers to the embedded incentives in programs intended to stimulate participation. Following Alford (2002), we can think of material incentives (e.g., small payments or access to services), social incentives (e.g., belonging or recognition), and normative incentives (e.g., contributing to a collective good). Programs may also assign tasks and roles that support intrinsic motivations, such as autonomy or solidarity. Rather than fully mapping participants' motivations, I focus on the incentives built into program structures and on which of these participants experience as salient in practice.

Third, co-production programs are designed with certain benefits in mind. Following Nabatchi et al. (2017), these benefits may be both personal (for individual participants) and social (for wider groups or communities). Specifically, co-production programs may aspire to generate a wide range of benefits – such as generating a sense of service ownership among users or making services more responsive to user needs. In Table 3.1, this is captured by contrasting the benefits that programs aim to achieve – for participants, staff, organizations, and in some cases the broader community – with the benefits that actors report in practice (Steiner et al. 2023, 515).

When and where

The *when* of co-production relates to the phase of the service cycle in which the co-production takes place or the service activities (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Nabatchi et al., 2017; Steiner et al., 2023). The *where* refers to the socio-political context of the co-production. These dimensions are crucial in cross-sectoral or international comparisons. In this dissertation, however, the *when* dimension is kept relatively constant by focusing in both cases on co-production in the design and delivery of services.

The *where* dimension relates to the context in which co-production occurs, referring for instance to the geographical and socio-political context. Variation in the *where* dimension is treated as contextual background: Chapter 5 introduces the national policy field context in which all cases operate, and sketches the historical development of the two organizations and the (co-produced) services they deliver.

Table 3.1 Operationalizing co-production programs

(Sub)dimension	Co-production as intended	Co-production in practice
<i>Who</i>		
Co-producers	Target group	Actual participants
Selection and recruitment	Selection and recruitment mechanisms as designed	Actual use of selection and recruitment mechanisms
Participant roles	Envisioned roles of target group	Roles of participants
Professional roles	Envisioned roles of professionals	Roles of professionals
<i>What</i>		
Co-producer activities	Envisioned participant tasks and responsibilities	Actual tasks and responsibilities
Decision-making powers	Formal decision-making powers for participants/professionals	Empirical distribution of decision-making powers
Professional activities	Planned staff tasks	Tasks performed by staff
<i>Why</i>		
Rationale of the program initiators	Espoused reasons for co-production	Reasons invoked by service-providing staff
Embedded incentives	Designed rewards and motivators	Which incentives participants experience as salient
Benefits	What benefits does the program aim to achieve	Reported benefits in practice

Co-production success: Alignment between intentions and practice

These (sub)dimensions relating to the *who*, *what*, and *why* of co-production programs are summarized in Table 3.1. As the right-hand side of the table shows, these dimensions can be used to study co-production programs both as intended in their formal design and as implemented in practice. In other words, the framework enables a comparison between the intended design of co-production programs and how they unfold in everyday service delivery. This makes it possible to systematically identify recurring differences that feature in the literature on co-production with vulnerable groups, as discussed in the previous chapter. For example, the framework allows

us to examine whether the intended target group is actually reached (or whether patterns of unequal participation persist), and whether participants in practice can exercise the influence promised on paper, or whether co-production remains closer to tokenism.

3.2 Theoretically explaining when co-production is successful

3

The remaining part of this chapter turns from conceptualizing success to theoretically explaining it. Like service provision more generally (Rice 2012; Sandfort and Moulton, 2015), co-production is shaped by a wide array of actors and factors across levels. A multi-level approach is therefore necessary: participants and frontline workers operate within program structures, which in turn are embedded in organizational and institutional contexts. All of these actors and conditions may affect whether co-production efforts are successful.

In line with studies on co-production and street-level bureaucracy more generally, I take a bottom-up approach to do this, starting with a participant group, the co-production structure in which they operate, frontline support, and the organizational conditions in which frontline workers operate. Processes at the individual, organizational, and institutional level all have a role in enabling co-production (e.g., Fledderus 2016, 123-125; Tuurnas 2016, 83), and each level may shape how co-production unfolds in practice. However, few studies on co-production actually take all levels into account (Cepiku et al. 2021, 54). This chapter seeks to integrate these levels in order to provide a comprehensive framework of potential conditions for successful co-production.

3.2.1 Participant group

The first actors to consider in co-production are its participants. Much research has examined who co-producers are and why they participate (e.g., Alford 2002; Pestoff 2012; Van Eijk 2016; Vanleene et al. 2017; Van Eijk and Gascó 2018). This literature typically highlights citizens' characteristics, motivations, and – particularly salient for vulnerable groups – the barriers they may face to active involvement (e.g., Jakobsen and Andersen 2013). Generally, studies assume that citizens participate when they are both willing and able (Alford 2002; Van Eijk and Steen 2016), with limited resources and capacities often restricting participation for vulnerable citizens. Such factors, however, mainly help explain whether co-production occurs at all, rather than how it unfolds once participants are involved. Many of these conditions (e.g., incentives, tasks, and responsibilities) are therefore better understood as embedded

in program structures than as properties of the citizens themselves and will therefore be discussed later.

By contrast, far less is known about how service users participate in practice, and what makes their behavior align with program intentions. If co-production indeed grants participants decision-making power, they should exert significant influence over how processes evolve. Yet evidence of how such influence is exercised remains scarce. Moreover, in group-based co-production, we know little about the conditions that enable groups to function effectively: how responsibilities are shared, how norms and rules are upheld, and how conflicts are handled. The relevant question is therefore not only if and why citizens participate, but also how they do so once involved, and which conditions and dynamics shape their behavior in groups rather than as isolated individuals. Three interrelated aspects of participant groups seem especially important here: capacity, trust, and commitment.

First, with vulnerable groups, it is plausible that participants' capacities and resources play a central role. As argued earlier, vulnerability denotes a fundamental inability to meet certain demands and refers to a lack of resources, deficits, or illness, which co-production may in part seek to address. As such, vulnerable citizens may possess fewer resources and capacities to participate in co-production. This may shape how they experience and perform tasks, and how professionals perceive and approach them. In many co-production efforts, the aim is precisely to create opportunities to (re)develop skills and capacities, rather than to require fully formed capacities at the outset. This, however, can demand additional work from service providers, as participants' starting capacities may be limited or unstable (Broadhurst 2024, 261). It is therefore plausible that participants need at least a basic level of capacity or self-efficacy to be able to take on responsibilities in co-production (Fledderus 2016; Brandsen 2021), while at the same time these capacities may be strengthened through participation itself.

Second, trust is often seen as essential for meaningful co-production (Fledderus 2015). Authors especially emphasize the importance of trust from participants in service providers. With vulnerable groups, this trust may be missing at the outset of co-production. Stougaard (2020) argues that successful cooperation may first depend on establishing *calculus-based trust* (cf. Rousseau et al. 1998), grounded in a rationally calculated perception of mutual interest, before relational trust can be further developed.

The third is commitment. Empirical work emphasizes that participants' commitment is often critical for the sustained success of co-production (McMullin 2024, 3418). However, this is something that must be built throughout the process and which is fostered by mutual trust between professionals and participants (Garminati et al. 2023). In group efforts, commitment is rarely evenly distributed: some participants contribute substantially while others free-ride (Fledderus 2015, 559-60). Such unevenness may reduce alignment between program intentions and everyday practice (also see Vanleene et al. 2018). As Fledderus (2015) argues, commitment among participants tends to be higher when they can relate to others in the group and when they perceive professional (managerial) support as horizontal. This also relates to findings on the importance of developing a group identity, formed around a common vision and shared goals (Frieling et al. 2014; Cepiku et al. 2021, 62). Commitment in groups, then, is reflected in a shared sense of responsibility and shared ownership.

Literature on rational choice institutionalism and organizational behavior offers two complementary perspectives (Robertson and Tang 1995). From an organizational behavior perspective, commitment refers to participants' "identification with and involvement in" an initiative (Mowday et al. 1979, 226), emphasizing their emotional attachment and cognitive alignment with its goals, norms, and values, and their willingness to act in its support (Solinger et al. 2008, 80). From a rational choice perspective, commitment concerns credibility: why participants would uphold promises even when defection appears individually advantageous (Robertson and Tang 1995, 71). Here, commitment is understood as strategic interdependence: individuals are more likely to remain engaged when they expect others to do so as well, and when defection entails costs, for example, through enforceable agreements (Ostrom 1996, 1082). Although these perspectives differ in emphasis, they converge on the idea that commitment is fostered through social processes, leadership, and structural design (Robertson and Tang 1995).

In short, this suggests that for understanding co-production with vulnerable citizens, it is not sufficient to focus on individual motivations to participate at the point of entry. The capacities that participants bring and develop, their trust in frontline workers and fellow participants, and the strength of commitment within participant groups could serve as key in shaping how co-production unfolds in practice and the extent to which group behavior remains aligned with program intentions over time.

3.2.2 Program structure

Participants tend to operate within program structures that are defined before their involvement. This dissertation devotes much attention to such structures

– co-production *as designed* – because they shape how participation unfolds (McMullin 2024, 3414). Structures set out roles and responsibilities for service users and frontline workers, and indicate the ways in which participants may influence the services they use. Yet, as Sicilia et al. (2019, 237) note, “*surprisingly few studies discuss the design of the co-production process in any depth.*”

If successful co-production with vulnerable groups requires sustained participant commitment, then program design must take into account participants’ capacities and wishes. Participation is shaped by whether citizens consider themselves capable of co-producing, perceive the activities as salient, and believe their involvement makes a difference (Pestoff 2012; Van Eijk and Steen 2016; Stougaard 2021). For vulnerable citizens, barriers such as limited resources, multiple problems, and a lack of trust are particularly salient (Numans et al. 2021; Reinhoudt-den Boer et al. 2021, 244; Stougaard 2021; Fledderus and Honingh 2016; Van Dijck and Steen 2024). Past experiences of exclusion may also make users skeptical about service providers’ intentions to create real influence, further reducing motivation to participate (Van Eijk and Steen 2016).

To address these challenges, program structures can provide additional resources to service users, such as time, training, or financial support, to help overcome barriers to participation (Jakobsen and Andersen 2013; Stougaard 2021). Another strategy is to offer targeted incentives. While external rewards – such as financial compensation or material benefits – are often considered to have limited motivational value for co-production in general (Voorberg et al. 2018), they may be more effective in, for instance, contexts of high unemployment (Letki and Steen 2021). This suggests that the effects of incentives depend on their context. In contexts of high poverty, monetary incentives may be more useful in stimulating participation.

Similarly, (threats of) sanctions may be useful in stimulating people to co-produce (Fledderus and Honingh 2016). At the same time, if programs rely too heavily on such incentives, programs risk instrumentalizing co-production, reinforcing financial dependence, or crowding out intrinsic motivations (Fledderus, Brandsen, and Honingh 2014). Thereby, an overreliance on such incentives may lead to reinforced feelings of dependence and power differences, which tend to be associated with societal vulnerability (Numans et al. 2021).

3.2.3 Professional support

Even when co-production programs are carefully designed and participant groups have the capacity, trust, and commitment to take on responsibilities, co-production

does not run itself. Especially in contexts with vulnerable groups, professional support is deemed to be crucial (Tuurnas 2016; Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Vanleene 2020, Vanleene et al. 2020; Broadhurst 2024; Acar et al. 2025, 1374). Several elements seem especially important for how frontline workers approach this, relating to roles and skills, discretionary autonomy, and their beliefs about their work and commitment to co-production.

Roles and skills in supporting co-production

Frontline workers may combine different roles when supporting co-production, each of which requires specific skills (Vanleene 2020; Mortensen 2021). In co-production with vulnerable citizens, their ability to empower and include participants is particularly important (Vanleene et al. 2020, 583). Through their everyday work, professionals help build the relational foundations – such as trust and commitment – that underpin co-production, as discussed earlier.

Vanleene (2020) distinguishes four ideal-typical roles: leader, friend, mediator, and representative. The first three concern how professionals relate to participants within co-production processes. As leaders, frontline workers set an example and structure the process; as friends, they build trust and motivate citizens to contribute; and as mediators, they focus on the group dimension by setting norms, resolving conflicts, and balancing perspectives. Externally, they act as representatives: they advocate the interests of the co-production initiative to outside actors, while also embodying the organization within the project. In practice, professionals often combine these roles. They may thereby stimulate co-production and make participation possible, but they can also obstruct it by disregarding citizens' input (Vanleene 2020, 170). These roles involve activities that are central in this chapter: building trust and commitment within participant groups and contributing to the legitimacy of the program. This, in turn, calls for strong relational skills focused on enabling and facilitating participants, while balancing potentially conflicting interests (Steen and Tuurnas 2018, 84).

Discretionary autonomy

Sufficient discretionary autonomy among frontline workers seems vital for effective service provision. As discussed in Chapter 2, street-level bureaucrats will always have some discretion, and their decisions shape how services are delivered and, accordingly, whether there are opportunities for co-production for vulnerable citizens. Staff members may use their discretionary space to pursue co-production – for instance, by bending rules or by actively involving participants in decision-making (Edri-Peer and Cohen 2025) – but they may also use it to limit some participants' involvement, for example by not informing clients of their personal budget (Fox et al. 2018, 53).

Empirically, higher experienced discretion is generally found to relate positively to street-level bureaucrats' willingness to implement policies (Tummers 2011; Tummers et al. 2009) and may even be a precondition for frontline workers' preparedness to implement policy (Thomann et al. 2018, 597). Likewise, frontline workers' autonomy in co-production is seen as important for their engagement and functioning (Van Eijk et al. 2019; Vanleene et al. 2020). Conversely, attempts to curtail discretion may have detrimental effects: workers may feel powerless in their work, lack autonomy, and as a result become alienated from the policies they deliver (Tummers 2011).

Co-production with vulnerable citizens is thus unlikely to take place in environments where implementers experience little discretion: if frontline workers experience little power, clients are likely to experience even less. The key question is therefore not whether frontline workers should have discretionary autonomy, but how the environment can be organized so that they use their discretion to facilitate, rather than restrict, co-production. The next section approaches this question by examining how frontline workers' beliefs about their role and about clients shape their commitment to co-production.

Frontline beliefs and commitment to co-production

For co-production to be successful, it is not enough that frontline workers can use their discretion; they also have to be willing to do so in ways that support co-production. In the co-production literature, it is commonly argued that frontline staff must be willing to co-produce and prepared to accept citizens as partners (Bovaird 2007; Sicilia et al. 2016; Steen and Tuurnas 2019; Cepiku et al. 2021). Yet we know much less about what precisely makes frontline workers more or less inclined to engage in co-production (Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Brandsen et al. 2024). In this section, I therefore argue that frontline workers' commitment to co-production depends on a combination of their role conceptions and their perceptions of clients.

How frontline workers use their discretion – and whether this brings a co-production initiative closer to its intentions – may depend first on what they believe good practice entails. At the frontline, especially in situations “*where the rules run out*,” values and beliefs are expected to guide behavior (Zacka 2017, 156). Role conceptions form “*an explicit core of beliefs as to what it means to perform one's role well*” (Zacka 2017, 90). Although situationally adapted, a general orientation tends to shape a frontline worker's default inclination in concrete encounters (Zacka 2017, 79).

Client perceptions operate alongside role conceptions, concerning ideas on service users' trustworthiness, reliability, and preparedness to collaborate, and are widely

argued to influence how workers engage with service users (Keulemans 2020, 16; Baviskar and Winter 2017; Keulemans and Van de Walle 2020; Zacka 2017). Especially in enduring services, such perceptions will be based on specific user characteristics, rather than on a 'general' view of clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2023). In individual service interactions, frontline workers' actions could therefore be based on their perceptions of what is appropriate in a given 'case' (Brandsen et al. 2024; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2023) – whether this is grounded in moral judgments, in professional problem-solving logic, or in what is deemed appropriate from a state-agent perspective in light of existing rules and policies.

These beliefs may be especially salient with vulnerable groups, where professionals frequently express skepticism about clients' capacity to co-produce and their trustworthiness (Kleinhans 2017; Reinhoudt-den Boer et al. 2021; Van de Wetering 2024, 513). As Van de Wetering (2024, 513) notes, *"professionals (...) viewed the residents as incapable of participating in appropriate ways and/or on their own."* Such dispositions may lead workers to withhold influence from clients – narrowing ownership and dampening engagement (Fledderus 2015, 561; Matscheck and Piuva 2020; Stougaard 2020). Importantly, these judgments can be accurate in some cases; the point for analysis is that they steer how much participatory space is opened or closed in practice.

These are rarely purely individual beliefs. Frontline practice is inherently collective: peers are a "constant panoptic presence" that shapes what feels acceptable in recurring situations (Zacka 2017, 183; also see Hupe and Hill 2007; Hasenfeld 2010). Through policy communication, incentives, evaluation routines, training, recruitment, and informal socialization, teams develop practice ideologies: *"shared beliefs about the clients and their needs and appropriate service responses that provide the workers with guidance and a rationale for their actions"* (Hasenfeld 2010, 609). In sum, it seems plausible that frontline workers' behavior in supporting co-production and their use of discretion is partly shaped by their beliefs about their role and clients, which are nested within team-level practice ideologies.

These beliefs do not arise in a vacuum: they are formed and revised in interaction with organizational arrangements (workload, resources, incentives, accountability) and the broader social environment. Such conditions do not just shape practice ideologies, but also the resources and incentive structures for implementers. Any analysis of frontline conditions for co-production is therefore incomplete without attending to the institutional conditions surrounding them.

3.2.4 Organizational conditions

Frontlines are embedded in street-level bureaucracies: organizations that do not determine the content of policies, but are responsible for implementing them (Lipsky 2010). In practice, these organizations act as *de facto* policymakers, as they shape and reshape policies in their daily routines and organizational practices (Brodtkin 2011, 253; also see Sandfort and Moulton 2015). Hence, organizations critically influence the possibilities of street-level bureaucrats to co-produce. To understand how co-production with vulnerable groups can be realized, it is necessary to examine which organizational conditions may enable or obstruct it.

Workload, resources, and skills

Street-level bureaucrats tend to operate in demanding environments where expectations outweigh available means (Lipsky 2010; Hasenfeld 2010). This gap between demands and resources is central in Lipsky's analysis: when workloads are unmanageable, workers may resort to coping strategies that run counter to responsive service provision (Hasenfeld 2010, 606-607). Co-production, however, is often time- and resource-intensive (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012). It requires individual attention, dialogue, and often tailor-made solutions. Time for client contact, access to adequate service options, and training to enhance workers' communicative skills could therefore serve as key enablers (Sicilia et al. 2016; Lindsay et al. 2018; Larsen and Caswell 2020; Marston and Davidson 2020). When resources are lacking, aspirations for co-production are likely to remain unrealized.

Organizational structure

Furthermore, certain organizational structures may be fitting for different service delivery strategies – ranging from bureaucratic processing to professional treatment – and thus impact the implementation of co-production (Hasenfeld 2009, 611-612; Broadhurst 2024, 10-11). Organizational (social) structure denotes the coordination and division of tasks and responsibilities within organizations (Hatch and Cuncliffe 2018, 91-93; Sandfort and Moulton, 2015, 160).

Scholars generally assume that organizational structures with less formalization and, thereby, more flexibility are better suited for co-production (Verschuere et al., 2012; Surva et al., 2016; Marston and Davidson, 2020, 103). Larsen and Caswell (2020) note that standardization in organizations often conflicts with the unicity of client problems (9). Therefore, it is expected that organizations with lower formalization are more fitting for co-production because these can offer street-level bureaucrats the discretion to provide tailor-made solutions to clients' problems, which is expected to be especially salient in contexts where vulnerable clients have complex problems. Relatedly, authors

have found that organizational structures with little hierarchy foster co-production approaches (Bauer, Evans-Lacko, and Knapp 2019). Furthermore, organizations can deliberately structure space for co-production, for example by appointing dedicated staff to facilitate user involvement or by creating formalized roles for service users within organizational processes (Sicilia et al. 2019, 244).

Beyond formal structures, organizations therefore also steer how discretion is exercised through organizational culture and managerial commitment. The next sections turn to these dimensions.

Organizational culture

Multiple authors have noted the importance of positive cultures toward user involvement for the implementation of co-production (Steen and Tuurnas 2018, 87; Torfing et al. 2019, 817). Generally, it is expected that organizational cultures should be flexible, positive toward innovation, and have some sort of risk tolerance (Voorberg et al. 2015). As Sicilia et al. (2019) note: *“organizational culture should be recast to increase the focus on service users”* (14).

The conduciveness of organizational cultures may be important for whether co-production takes off, but also for its sustainability. For instance, Regal et al. (2024) argue that the sustained embedding of co-production can be enabled by creating a balanced leadership culture, in which a centralized mission is balanced with decentralized action, where there is considerable autonomy but which is confined by clear boundaries, and where there is a strong collective identity which is open enough for internal criticism and for incorporating external criticism from co-producers.

When specifically seeking to involve vulnerable citizens, the role of culture may be especially salient. As section 3.2.3. suggested, frontline beliefs about clients and co-production are formed and reinforced within teams and organizations. In cultures marked by risk aversion and doubts about citizens' capacity to participate, these are likely to be amplified at the frontline, pushing professionals toward control and exclusion rather than shared responsibility. On the other hand, when organizations have institutionalized co-production into their organizational cultures, it may be recognized and appreciated throughout the organization, thereby increasing the likelihood that co-production initiatives succeed and endure (Mortensen, McMullin, and Brix 2025).

Managerial commitment

A key characteristic of street-level bureaucracies is the impossibility of meeting all organizational demands. Besides acquiring resources, organizations thus have to *deploy* their resources strategically. Street-level bureaucracies have to prioritize which goals, objectives, and (aspects of) policies they deem salient. Therefore, it is unlikely that all organizational rules and procedures are followed in practice. Prioritization is one of the ways in which street-level bureaucracies are de facto policymakers (Lipsky 2010, 19; Brodtkin, 2011). Therefore, managerial *commitment* to co-production is expected to have an important influence on the implementation of such co-production.

Commitment may affect the allocation of financial resources, but can also be reflected in organizations' hiring practices – for instance, in what kind of skills and traits are valued in newly recruited staff. Furthermore, prioritization may be seen in the ways in which public managers may influence service agents through how they communicate these goals and priorities. For example, implementation may be stimulated by emphasizing the policy's connection to professional values or by persuading service agents of a co-production effort's societal meaningfulness (Jakobsen and Andersen 2017). In other words, managers may try to actively frame the value of co-production to frontline workers in the contexts of the different street-level narratives as outlined in Chapter 3.4.

The importance of managerial commitment for frontline work has been noted both in the co-production literature (e.g., Sicilia et al. 2017, 236; Steen and Tuurnas 2018, 86) and for street-level service provision in general (e.g., Keulemans and Groeneveld 2020). Managers may create milieus hospitable or hostile to co-production, as previously discussed – for instance, by influencing the organization's incentive structure, by fostering shared norms and values, and by hiring new staff based on their dispositions toward citizen involvement (see Zacka 2017, 219-222).

Interactions with the external environment

Beyond internal organizational arrangements, the work of these organizations will be shaped by the wider institutional environment with which organizations interact. For programs working with vulnerable citizens, the organizational environment is particularly consequential: funding, collaboration, legitimacy, and regulatory pressures all influence whether co-production can be realized in practice.

Co-production with vulnerable groups may be resource-intensive. It requires time for dialogue, opportunities for tailored support, and often sustained relational work

(Broadhurst 2024). Stable funding, with sufficient flexibility in how to use it, may therefore be considered a precondition (Lindsay et al. 2018). Conversely, outcome-based funding can generate perverse incentives, such as creaming – focusing on participants who are easiest to support – while leaving more complex cases aside (Fledderus and Honingh 2016; Farr 2016).

A second external condition concerns collaboration between organizations. This could be particularly salient when working with vulnerable groups, who often depend on multiple service providers (Lindsay et al. 2018; Matscheck and Piuva 2020, 2021). Especially when co-production requires adjustments or cooperation from other actors, it is essential to bring stakeholders in the organizational environment on board. Boundary spanners may play a critical role, actively reaching across organizational borders to mobilize resources and legitimacy for co-production (Vanleene 2020; Broadhurst 2024)

Underlying both resources and collaboration is the perceived legitimacy of a co-production program among policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders. Service providers deliver services that are hard to measure and perform moral work, which means they must continually justify both their authority to work with clients and the ways in which they do so (Hasenfeld 2010). Since it is often uncertain which service interventions are most effective, what counts is often whether something is seen as a good or moral practice. This could be crucial for co-production with vulnerable groups. As discussed in the previous chapter, service interventions typically combine elements of empowerment and support with elements of control (K. Brown 2024). Co-productive arrangements involving citizens regarded as deviant or transgressive may therefore appear less legitimate to policymakers or local stakeholders. Because such initiatives diverge from established routines, they rely heavily on sustained goodwill from their environment. Support from residents, partner organizations, and policymakers can be decisive in whether programs succeed. Conversely, where local political dynamics are adverse to co-productive services with a vulnerable group, local stakeholders may push frontline workers toward punitive enforcement rather than supportive engagement (Nevarez Martinez 2023).

Finally, regulatory frameworks can either enable or constrain co-production. Central policies may encourage individualized service delivery and citizen involvement (Matscheck and Piuva 2020), but institutional pressures linked to security, political sensitivity, or accountability often push organizations toward greater standardization (Surva et al. 2017; Fox et al. 2018). Such dynamics reduce flexibility and narrow the room for frontline workers to use discretion in co-productive ways.

In sum, organizational interactions with its environment – funding, collaboration, legitimacy, and regulation – may play a decisive role in how co-production unfolds. These conditions interact closely with the organizational and frontline levels discussed earlier, shaping not only the space available to frontline workers but also the extent to which co-production aligns with program intentions.

All in all, the preceding sections suggest that co-production success – understood as alignment between program intentions and everyday practice – depends on conditions at four interrelated levels. Table 3.2 summarizes these levels and the theoretical conditions that may enable successful co-production. Co-production starts with a participant group that is able and willing to engage, supported by an appropriate program structure and by frontline workers. These, in turn, are shaped by organizational arrangements and their interactions with the wider institutional environment.

Table 3.2 Theoretical conditions enabling co-production success

Theme	Main function	Relevant aspects
Participant group	Ensure that participants can and want to participate in co-production, in line with program intentions	• Capacities • Trust • Commitment
Program structure	Align co-production design with the target group's needs, capacities, and wishes	• Roles and responsibilities • Incentives
Frontline support	Enable and sustain participants' involvement through everyday support	• Roles and skills in supporting participant groups • Discretionary autonomy • Role conceptions and client perceptions to facilitate commitment
Organizational support	Provide a supportive context in which frontline workers can enact co-production intentions	• Shape frontline conditions (resources, staff skills, workload) • Structure (autonomy and flexibility) • Culture open to co-production • Managerial commitment • Active efforts to sustain resources, support, and legitimacy within the program environment

Chapter overview

This chapter developed the analytical framework that guides the empirical part of the dissertation in three steps. First, I conceptualized what constitutes success in co-production with vulnerable citizens. Rather than evaluating co-production in terms of outcomes, success was operationalized as the degree to which co-production is enacted in practice in line with a program's own intentions. The alignment between program design and day-to-day implementation serves as an analytical proxy for co-production success throughout the dissertation.

Second, the chapter introduced a framework for analyzing co-production programs by specifying key dimensions along which intentions and practice can be compared. Focusing on who is involved, what participants and professionals do and decide, and why actors engage in co-production, the framework makes it possible to assess variation in alignment within and between programs.

Third, I outlined the conditions that may shape whether such alignment can be achieved in practice. Building mainly on co-production and street-level bureaucracy literature, I identified conditions at four interrelated levels: (1) the participant group, (2) the program structure, (3) professional support at the frontline, and (4) organizational conditions and their interaction with the wider institutional environment. Together, these two parts of the framework offer a structured lens for understanding why co-production with vulnerable citizens sometimes moves closer to, and at other times drifts away from, its stated ambitions.



Chapter 4.

Methods

In this chapter, I describe the methods used to address the question under which conditions co-production with vulnerable citizens can be successful. I begin by discussing the general research design, explaining the research setting and why ethnography provides an appropriate approach to study co-production as it unfolds in practice. The following part explains how comparison and a contrastive logic of explanation guide the analysis in general. Subsequently, I discuss the specifics of this approach by presenting the case selection and discussing the processes of data collection and analysis. This chapter ends with a reflection on my positionality, epistemology, and the quality of this research.

4.1 Research design

4.1.1 Ethnography

This dissertation is situated in Dutch homelessness services, a field in which both the vulnerability of service users and ambitions for co-production are particularly pronounced. Homelessness services bring together high levels of vulnerability among service users with widespread ambitions for co-production. Section 5.1 provides a more detailed overview of this policy field.

To do justice to the complex and precarious context of homeless services and to gain insight into the practice of co-production, this research employs an ethnographic approach. This approach involves the intensive, long-term study of a few cases within their natural environment, focusing primarily on the actions and accounts of participants through methods such as participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, and document analyses (O'Reilly 2012, 11; Van Hulst et al. 2017, 224; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 3).

There are three main reasons why ethnography is especially suitable for this research project. First, ethnography makes it possible to focus on action rather than merely on accounts of action. Given the theoretical expectation that the ambitions of co-production are not always realized in practice, it is crucial to observe what people do, not only what they say. As Jerolmack and Khan (2014, 201) put it, *“If action is of interest, then the best – and sometimes the only – way to know about it is to actually observe activity.”* The emphasis of ethnographic research on action – what people do and why – fits well with this ambition to research co-production processes as they unfold in practice (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 170).

Second, many processes that lie beneath co-production remain unexplored, as Cullingworth, Brunner, and Watson (2024) note: “*much of the work of co-production is ‘blackboxed,’ (...) risking the assumption that co-production just works once a commitment has been made*” (279; for a similar remark, see Fledderus 2016, 130). Ethnography is uniquely positioned to uncover such processes (Hupe, Hill, and Buffat 2015, 10; Van Hulst et al. 2017) because its open-ended, flexible nature, makes it possible to uncover the underlying processes through which co-production takes shape: shifting power relations, tensions and conflicts, group dynamics, and the gradual building (or erosion) of trust. The iterative and flexible approach of ethnography (e.g., Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 168) allows researchers to “*go with the flow*” (Van Hulst et al. 2017, 232) and pursue surprising findings (Tavory and Timmermans 2022; Van Hulst and Visser 2024).

Finally, ethnography facilitates building trust and rapport with service users. The sustained engagement characteristic of this method is especially suitable for involving vulnerable individuals in research, who are often seen as hard-to-reach (Hoolachan, 2016). Any balanced account of how co-production plays out in practice must center the experiences not just of frontline workers, managers, and policymakers, but – above all – of the service users themselves. My recurrent and long-term involvement in cases was essential for gaining insights into their perspectives and experiences.

4.1.2 Comparative ethnography and contrastive explanation

Beyond exploring the practice of co-production, this dissertation aims to explain why and under which conditions co-production with vulnerable citizens can be successful. To do this, I use a comparative approach (Simmons and Smith 2019) and use a logic of contrastive explanation (Lichterman and Reed 2014).

Ethnographic explanation often relies on comparison – whether within or across cases, or even with “*their hometowns, to previous research sites, or to other ethnographies*” (Simmons and Smith 2019, 349). Yet, this comparative logic often remains implicit. Ethnographers may not always spell out how they move back and forth between cases to construct an argument, nor explain why particular comparisons shed light on the phenomenon under study (Simmons and Smith 2019, 349–350). In comparative ethnography, this logic is made explicit by “*tacking back and forth between cases*” to build arguments about processes and mechanisms (341–342).

This dissertation builds on comparison by using a contrastive logic of explanation. According to Lichterman and Reed (2014), ethnographic causal questions tend not to just ask why a particular outcome occurred, but why this outcome emerged *rather*

than another that could reasonably have occurred (597). Explanation, in this sense, depends on identifying plausible potential alternative outcomes (the ‘contrast space’) and tracing observed differences back to underlying processes. Such contrasts can be developed within a single case over time, between different field sites, or against theoretical expectations. The explanatory task, then, is to identify aspects that account for why the observed outcome took the form it did instead of other reasonable alternatives (621).

Importantly, contrastive explanations do not seek to provide exhaustive or totalizing accounts. Rather, they aim to clarify why a given phenomenon assumed one particular form in one context – within a defined contrast space informed by both theory and empirical observation. By linking these situated differences to mechanisms that may also be recognized in other settings, ethnography can produce causal claims that are both context-sensitive and generalizable. A particular strength of ethnographic inquiry in this regard is that uncovering such mechanisms often entails interpreting how actors themselves make meaning of their circumstances (see also Simmons and Smith 2019, 349). Think, for instance, of a concept like ‘practice ideology’ that was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter.

4.1.3 Cases and contrasts

This dissertation applies the comparative and contrastive logics previously discussed through analyzing co-production with vulnerable groups in two organizations. Both provide homeless services in the Netherlands and explicitly aim to practice a form of co-production with service users. The selection of these cases followed an emergent and abductive logic, characteristic of ethnographic inquiry where access often dictates the starting point (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

The first case is NuNN, a small night shelter in Nijmegen. What makes NuNN distinctive is its model of self-management: residents can take on active roles in practical tasks and collectively decide on admissions, rules, and daily operations. Professional support is present during office hours, but their involvement is formally limited to facilitation and advice. In that sense, NuNN represents a radical form of co-production: a small-scale shelter grounded in ideals of self-management where professional support is not always present, even though it targets a highly vulnerable group. This created the chance to observe co-production with vulnerable citizens in its most ambitious form. However, because NuNN is such an unusual outlier, it raised the question: do these findings hold in a more typical organizational setting? To address this, I sought a second case that could provide a more conventional contrast.

This became DRG, a large multi-service organization in Amsterdam and Zaanstad. DRG operates ten drop-in centers and a wide range of other programs for people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable citizens. Co-production here takes several forms: everyday participation by visitors in the running of centers, formal client councils with advisory and decision-making influence, and, in some places, initiatives in self-management. DRG thus provided me with a setting where different models of co-production coexisted under one organizational roof, and where variation across multiple frontline sites could be observed.

The analysis in this dissertation rests on a series of contrasts. First, within each case I encountered moments – sometimes observed directly, sometimes recounted by respondents – when the ambitions of co-production were realized more fully, or fell short. Second, I contrasted NuNN with DRG – not only at the level of the two organizations, but also by examining the variation within DRG's multiple programs and frontlines. And third – as discussed further in Section 4.5 on data analysis – I read the data against theory, abductively contrasting (my interpretations of) the data with the claims and expectations inferred from the literature. All these forms of comparison allowed me to develop plausible alternatives to observations, eventually helping me to provide explanations for these observations. Together, these layers of comparison formed a contrast space that enabled me to move back and forth between fieldwork and theory, working toward explanations of why co-production with vulnerable citizens might succeed in some contexts and falter in others. The structure of the empirical chapters mirrors this logic. First, I provide a historical background of both organizations. Then I examine co-production as intended for each form of co-production, and subsequently analyze how the programs' practical implementation reflects these intentions. From there, I turn to the social mechanisms that shaped these practices, before closing with a section about conditions that made it possible, in some instances, for co-production efforts to live up to their intentions.

4.2 Fieldwork

The fieldwork of this dissertation spanned several years, from 2023 to 2025. This section details how this process unfolded. I first describe the process of gaining access to the field, before turning to the specific methods of data collection employed.

4.2.1 Getting access

This research began in 2020, during the pandemic, when lockdowns continued intermittently until early 2022. After formulating the central puzzle of this research,

I explored several policy domains – such as municipal debt services, prisoner reintegration, and probation services. I eventually decided that homelessness services would provide the most promising field due to its combination of vulnerable service users and co-production ambitions. I initially focused on Housing First, which emphasizes individual co-production by giving clients more influence and self-direction over services they use.

The first case, however, came somewhat unexpectedly. I had initially planned to focus on Housing First in Nijmegen, but when I presented my research puzzle to a municipal policy advisor, he told me that, while the municipality aims to stimulate forms of self-direction in all services, he expected Housing First would not fundamentally differ from regular services. Instead, he suggested I look at NuNN. He connected me with one of the shelter's social workers, who was immediately open to hosting research, provided the residents agreed. In September 2022, I attended a weekly residents' meeting, explained my project, and asked for permission. The residents approved on the spot, without conditions, contracts, or formal negotiations. From then on, I became a regular presence, visiting almost weekly for about ten months. Access here was straightforward, based on mutual trust rather than formal agreements – although, as I discuss later, individual respondents did sign informed consent forms.

As explained earlier, I sought to contrast my findings at NuNN with a more conventional homeless service provider. After unsuccessful talks with another shelter, the second case emerged in early 2023, when a fellow researcher introduced me to DRG in Amsterdam. DRG had recently experimented with forms of self-management in its drop-in centers and welcomed the idea of research. In a meeting with the organization's research advisor, we discussed the general outline of my project and agreed on access. She introduced me to the managers of each drop-in center, and together we selected three centers to situate my research. Through snowball sampling during fieldwork, I also gained access to three additional centers. Access here, too, was straightforward and based on mutual trust rather than contracts or formal agreements. I began fieldwork in the summer of 2023.

4.2.2 Data collection

This section presents the data collection. Although my actual research process unfolded differently, I present the methods here in the order that mirrors the structure of the empirical chapters. This means I first will discuss the analysis of documents, which provided insight into how co-production was intended in policy and organizational contexts. Next, I turn to participant observations, which formed the core of my research and allowed me to study co-production as it unfolded. After

that, I will describe the interviews I conducted, which complemented and deepened the observations by bringing in the perspectives of service users, professionals, managers, and other stakeholders. Finally, I address the member checks I conducted to check interpretations with respondents.

Document analysis

This dissertation uses documents for two main purposes. First, Chapter 5 relies primarily (though not exclusively) on documents to sketch the broader background of the two cases. The exact sources differ by case. For NuNN, these included newspaper articles, archival materials from the city archive (such as council debates on the night shelter), and a few contemporary publications directly addressing NuNN. These were at times supplemented with accounts from respondents who were involved during that period. For DRG, I drew mainly newspaper articles, a few books, and organizational documents such as annual reports and web pages to reconstruct the organization's origins. The aim was not to provide an exhaustive history of either organization, but rather to create a contextual picture – or a ‘panoramic view’ (Van Hulst et al. 2017, 229) of their development and of how co-production initiatives emerged within them.

Second, I used policy and organizational documents to map the co-production programs and reconstruct the intentions behind them, following the analytical framework (the *who, what, and why* of co-production,). These materials included annual reports, internal documents, and artifacts (such as house rules displayed in shelters). In this way I was able to describe co-production *as intended*.

Document analysis therefore served both to provide an organizational sketch and to reconstruct the ambitions behind co-production. In the empirical chapters, these reconstructions function as key points of contrast with the practices I observed in the field.

Participant observations

Participant observation is often seen as the cornerstone of ethnographic research (Spradley 1980; O'Reilly 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). It combines systematic observation with everyday participation, allowing the researcher to study not only what people say but also what they do – and *why* they do it.

In this project, participant observation served four main purposes. First, it enabled me to study co-production as it unfolded in practice, rather than relying solely on verbal accounts (cf. Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Second, it created opportunities to

build rapport, ask informal questions, and engage in everyday interactions with both service users and staff. Third, it helped reduce the self-selection bias of interviews: while the most active participants were often willing to sit down with me, participant observation allowed me to see and hear from those less inclined to be interviewed. Finally, it allowed me to connect what people said to what they did, sharpening questions and sometimes testing interview accounts against behavior in practice. These purposes guided my use of participant observation across both cases, though their concrete realization differed between sites.

At NuNN, observation centered initially on the weekly residents' meetings, where residents collectively discussed rules, admissions, and day-to-day operations. Attending these meetings over ten months gave me sustained opportunities to observe decision-making in action, while also providing a natural entry point for informal conversations and interviews. I also joined several staff meetings where social workers prepared for the week ahead, and in January 2023 I spent five days shadowing the shelter's social workers to experience its daily rhythms – shopping trips, meetings at city hall, drop-ins from community police officers. Added to this were dozens of informal encounters – at local events, on train rides, during phone calls – so that my understanding of NuNN came almost as much from these in-between moments as from the formal observations.

At DRG, I began by spending several days in two drop-in centers, carrying out everyday tasks alongside staff. This gave me a feel for the daily bustle of the centers, the people who frequented them, the atmosphere, and the ways in which co-production was enacted in practice. I also visited the organization's self-managed shelter locations, sometimes during the day and occasionally in the evenings, engaging in informal conversations with users there. Over time, I increasingly attended the monthly client council meetings held in drop-in centers, as well as those at higher organizational levels. These offered insight into how users were not only involved in day-to-day activities but also in shaping the services delivered in the centers. As at NuNN, these observations allowed me to build trust, initiate informal conversations, and follow processes over time.

This means that I conducted participant observations with different degrees of involvement (Spradley 1980, 58). Working in DRG's drop-in centers, I had a more active role, whereas during most of my observations – during meetings – I took on a passive role; generally not speaking unless explicitly asked so. An important part of observing the meetings was listening to what they *say* in co-production. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) note this can be *“a useful source both of direct*

information about the setting and of evidence about the perspectives, concerns, and discursive practices of the people who produce them” (105).

In both settings I kept fieldnotes in similar ways. During meetings I typed jottings on my laptop, which allowed me to write more quickly. In line with my partial focus on the discursive practices in co-production, this allowed me to sometimes almost capture verbatim jottings, capturing the richness of interaction in what were often chaotic gatherings of up to eighteen people. I typically worked these notes up later the same day, often on the train home, while the events were still fresh in my mind (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 49; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 155-156). At times I made brief notes on my phone – particularly in the drop-in centers, where I was advised not to take conspicuous notes, as this could provoke suspicion from some visitors. These short notes, too, were expanded into full fieldnotes later in the day.

In this research, participant observation was used in two main ways. First, together with interviews, it allowed me to contrast how co-production processes unfolded in practice with how programs were *intended* to work. Second, the fieldnotes served to identify the social processes at the heart of co-production, and to analyze how particular conditions made co-production succeed – or fail – in specific moments. Different observations thus offered different contrasts, forming the building blocks for the explanations this dissertation ultimately advances.

Interviews

Interviews were a major source of data to understand how co-production was experienced by those involved. They also complemented observations by bringing in perspectives not always visible in everyday practice. My aim was to assemble a comprehensive view across roles, so I interviewed service users, (former) frontline workers, frontline managers, organizational leadership, and relevant stakeholders in the organizational environment, including both practitioners and policymakers. In doing so, interviews provided not only accounts of processes but also the meanings respondents themselves attached to co-production.

At NuNN, I began interviewing after roughly two months of observation. Because the organization is small, I did not preselect who to interview; I invited all social workers and all co-producers. In practice, not everyone agreed or was available – some were hesitant to talk to a researcher, others did not show up or canceled – but I interviewed all social workers and all co-producers who were willing. Regular service users (i.e., shelter users not participating in co-production) were harder to reach for sit-down interviews, yet I conducted two such interviews and, importantly, asked all

co-producers to reflect on their earlier period as guests. Two respondents (one social worker and one service user) were interviewed twice due to changing circumstances that warranted a follow-up.

At DRG, I started interviews after about a week of observation. Given the organization's size, I used purposive sampling centered initially on three drop-in centers (plus the organizational level), later adding additional co-producers and frontline managers from other locations as themes emerged in fieldwork. Most respondents were interviewed once, though a handful of central respondents were interviewed twice.

I conducted semi-structured interviews using flexible topic guides (see Appendix), generally following the spirit of open, non-directive questioning (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 122-123). To probe reasoning and clarify contested points, I sometimes adopted a more directive or challenging stance, inviting respondents to elaborate or substantiate their views. Insights from participant observation were crucial here: I asked targeted follow-ups about specific meetings or episodes, or used observed situations as counterpoints to respondents' accounts. In short, interviews and observations were brought 'into conversation with each other' (Van Hulst et al. 2017 226) – or triangulated (Seale 2011).

Interviews typically took place on site – in drop-in centers, at the shelter, or in organizational offices. I generally let conversations run as long as respondents allowed, which produced wide variation in length: a few lasted twenty minutes, several with social workers stretched to nearly three hours; but most took about an hour. Transcripts were produced through a mix of manual transcription, a professional transcription company, and an AI transcription service (mygoodtape.dk). External services signed confidentiality agreements to protect respondents' privacy. Informed consent was obtained from all interview respondents.

Analytically, interviews served two linked purposes. First, together with observation, they allowed me to contrast co-production as intended with co-production in practice by comparing formal rationales to lived experience. Second, they enriched the identification of mechanisms and conditions by surfacing respondents' own interpretations and disagreements, as well as the meanings they attached to co-production – elements not always legible in observed interaction alone. In this way, interview material became an integral part of the contrast space that underpins the explanations advanced in this dissertation.

Member checks

A final source of data came from member checks. Their main value lies in giving respondents the opportunity to review findings and bring in additional context or experiences. In this way, member checks can provide supplementary evidence to strengthen the validity of conclusions – or, at times, suggests alternative interpretations of the data (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 193-195). At the same time, I did not adopt the view that respondents have the final word. Instead, I followed the approach that information generated through member checks should itself be treated as additional data and evidence to be analyzed alongside other sources (Seale 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

At NuNN, I conducted three focus groups in January 2024 as a form of member review. Two were held with three social workers, and one with four service users. The aim was to create space for interaction and lively discussion, while keeping groups small enough to allow for in-depth exchange and ensure that all perspectives could be voiced. Each focus group lasted about two hours. To help participants prepare, we sent them a 10-page document one week in advance summarizing preliminary findings in accessible language. In consultation with the shelter, service users who participated received €50 compensation, which we considered fair given the preparatory reading and the time commitment. This covered the project's research budget and was the only financial compensation provided to participants during the study.

At DRG, member checks took a somewhat different form. About halfway into fieldwork, I first presented my findings orally to a group of staff members, while also inviting service users in individual conversations to share feedback. Based on their comments, I developed the presentation into a written report, which in turn generated further written feedback that was incorporated. At the end of the project, I shared and discussed the general findings of the broader dissertation with respondents, both written and orally. For this, I organized a presentation of my findings for organizational employees and a group interview with four active co-producers, for which these respondents were given a compensation of €20.

In sum, the empirical chapters are based on a combination of document analysis, participant observations, interviews, and member checks, for instance, through group interviews. Table 4.1 below presents a comprehensive overview of the data collected for this dissertation. More details about the respondents, data collection, and data management can be found in Appendices 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Table 4.1 Data collection

	NuNN	DRG
Location(s)	One shelter + transition housing	Six drop-in centers
Period	September 2022 – April 2024	June 2023 – May 2025
(Participant) Observation	Residents’ meetings; shadowing frontline workers; team meetings; other events (+/- 140 hours)	Client council meetings; team meetings; ‘working’ in drop-in center (+/- 100 hours)
Interviews	29 semi-structured interviews, with: • Participants/users (10) • Frontline workers (10) • Management (4) • Stakeholders (5)	44 semi-structured interviews, with: • participants (16) • frontline workers (8) • frontline managers (6) • management/advisors organization (5) • external advisors/volunteers client council (4) • municipal advisors (4)
Documents	Internal organizational documents; organizational publications; newspaper articles; archival resources; municipal policy	Internal organizational documents; organizational publications; newspaper articles
Member check	• Written presentation of insights • Three group interviews discussing these insights	• Written and oral presentations of insights • One group interview with participants

4.3 Data analysis

The analysis process reflected the iterative-inductive, or abductive, approach common to ethnographic research (O’Reilly 2012, 27; 177-179; Van Hulst and Visser 2024). Abductive analysis is especially useful for this dissertation, as it enables building on surprising findings during the process of data analysis and collection (Timmermans and Tavory 2022; Van Hulst and Visser 2024) and developing insights through iterative engagement with empirical observations, interpretations, and (strands of) theory throughout the research process. An abductive approach therefore allows the analysis to build on existing literature while remaining open to empirical surprises.

Especially for this dissertation’s focus on group co-production with vulnerable citizens, this abductive approach is suitable. While the literature provides some theoretical ideas about how such processes operate and which conditions may play an important role in co-production generally, there remains limited insight into how the underlying processes unfold in practice and which conditions enable successful group co-production with vulnerable citizens. This requires an open approach, especially so for the self-managed programs in this dissertation that have not been studied often.

Because of this, it is difficult to determine in advance which concepts will prove most explanatory in these atypical settings. An abductive approach therefore enabled me to draw on the co-production literature while staying open to empirical variation and surprises, iteratively refining interpretations as the analysis developed.

For the practical side of coding the data, I drew on Braun and Clarke's step-by-step guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (2019; 2022), without fully adopting the broader epistemological commitments of reflexive thematic analysis. Their framework – familiarization, open coding, theme generation, reviewing, refining, and writing up – provided a clear procedure. However, this was an iterative process: at each step, new interpretations were developed, and comparisons were made between data and theory.

Data analysis began a few months into fieldwork at NuNN with repeated engagement with fieldnotes and transcripts, followed by open coding in Atlas.ti. The process of familiarization (Braun and Clarke 2022, 35-36) involves both getting acquainted with the materials, while also de-familiarizing and distancing oneself from the data (Timmermans and Tavory 2022, 69).

After a while, I also started to generate initial themes relevant to the research questions. Braun and Clarke define a *theme* in reflexive thematic analysis as “*patterns of shared meaning, clustered around a central concept or idea*” (Braun and Clarke 2021, 341). In this stage of initial theme generation, I printed all the coded pieces of text on paper and/or onto an e-ink tablet to read them with more concentration than I could on a computer screen, with the hope of finding new connections to generate themes.

One example of such theme-formation was that a major challenge for social workers at NuNN in supporting self-management consisted of ‘aligning the group with self-management,’ a theme that revolved around, for instance, the dominant culture of a participant group, group balance, and group composition. This was present in social workers’ quotes: “*Well, it differs enormously from group to group. Sometimes, a participant group is willing to take its responsibilities very seriously and stimulate each other by communicating their expectations to others. And, sometimes, there is a group that does not have that. And then there you are as a social worker to motivate those people, to recognize that, and motivate them again.*” In developing this theme, I examined both episodes in which participant groups took responsibility and stimulated each other, and episodes in which such shared responsibility was lacking. These contrasts helped to clarify what “aligning the group with self-management” entailed in practice and which concrete dynamics supported or undermined it.

Reflective of the abductive approach taken in this study, such initial themes guided the ongoing fieldwork, as well as the literature (cf. Timmermans and Tavory 2022, 95-96). For example, the initial code of “aligning the group with self-management” was – based on iterations with theory around co-production – reworked into the broader category of *commitment*, a condition whose role could be traced across both cases and is a recurring topic in the literature (e.g., Ostrom 1990; Ostrom 1996; McMullin 2024). Over time, some themes were developed into analytic categories of *conditions for co-production*. Here, recurring contrasts – between participants, moments, and frontlines – helped identify aspects that enabled or constrained such conditions.

Another example that reflects the abductive approach taken in the data analysis was how I came to the idea of peer discretion and peer governance. During fieldwork and the process of data analysis, I repeatedly encountered episodes in which co-production participants made decisions that affected individual citizens, for instance about rules, access, rewards, or sanctions. When re-reading literature on street-level bureaucracy I was struck by how much some quotes by co-producing citizens reflected those of frontline workers – especially Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2022). This prompted me to both re-analyze the rest of the data, and allowed me to build on these insights in subsequent fieldwork.

Underlying the process of data analysis was an abductive logic of contrastive explanation (also see 4.2). While comparison focuses on identifying similarities and differences across cases, contrastive explanation goes one step further by asking why a particular outcome occurred *instead of* a plausible alternative (Lichterhan and Reed 2014). In this study, this meant not only comparing instances of co-production across programs, but explicitly contrasting moments in which co-production initiatives were successful with moments in which programs were less successful, in order to infer explanations. While this is not necessarily ‘visible’ in the codes and themes I developed, the codes were generated with the underlying idea of ‘how can we explain that this is observed, while alternatives could be plausible too.’ To answer such questions, I contrasted instances of successful co-production with instances with less success, drawing on interviews, observations, and organizational documents to reconstruct the processes leading to these divergent outcomes.

In the writing stage, the analysis was further developed. For instance, I presented several written concept versions of this case study to peers and wrote several manuscripts for publication about this research. These processes, as well as later reflection, sometimes led to new insights, which were subsequently included in the findings. In the final stage of the research, I conducted member checks, which

provided slightly new insights. In sum, the analysis was iterative, abductive, and contrastive. It sought to explain why co-production took one form in a given setting and another elsewhere, turning observed variation into the foundation for causal claims.

4.4 Positionality and reflexivity

As an ethnographer, one inevitably becomes part of the social world under study – meaning that observations, data, and findings are always, to some extent, shaped by one's own background (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 16). In my case, I generally came from a different personal background than many of the service users. I appeared more as one of the professionals: I hold an academic degree, have a stable job, I am white, and was raised in a secure middle-class household. While people with such characteristics are increasingly at risk of homelessness themselves, they remain rare in shelter settings, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter. In terms of background, I therefore often (though not always) shared more common ground with frontline workers, managers, and policymakers than with users of services.

This may have contributed to my general impression that establishing rapport with social workers felt easier at the very outset of the research than with users. A key component of fieldwork was cultivating familiarity and trust. Often, informal, recurrent contact – over a cup of coffee or a cigarette – proved helpful. At NuNN, for instance, I frequently arrived at the night shelter before the staff, who would be in a team meeting at the time. Typically, a resident would let me in, and I would sit upstairs on the couch, where the television was usually on. We would often share a cigarette and exchange small talk – how things were going, whether anything had happened recently, or discuss the past weekend's football matches. These recurring, informal routines gradually fostered familiarity, which in turn made people more willing to engage in conversation with me. At DRG, regular meetings also provided opportunities to connect with participants, especially in the moments before and after formal gatherings. Because meetings occurred less frequently – usually once a month – it took more time to establish bonds with everyone, but eventually the same principle mattered: being consistently present – not only for meetings and scheduled observations, but also for social events and celebrations – was useful in building trust with respondents across different groups.

During fieldwork, I positioned myself as a curious outsider. In observational settings, I aimed to remain in the background, primarily watching and taking note of

what unfolded. During meetings, I usually sat at the edge of the table – somewhere that offered a good overview without drawing attention. In interviews, I sought to speak in the respondents' own terms. At the most basic level, this meant using their vocabulary: we spoke of self-management or the location councils, rather than co-production.

I was open about my role as a researcher. However, it was not always practically feasible to explain this in detail to every individual. Shelter settings tend to have a high turnover of users and participants. In such contexts, it is not always customary – nor practical – to introduce oneself at length to every new face. When people returned more frequently, I would take time to explain my role more thoroughly. Until then, many individuals experiencing homelessness assumed I was either a staff member or “*someone from the municipality*,” as people from various organizations regularly visit these spaces.

Interacting with and observing individuals experiencing homelessness differed markedly from interacting with professionals. Conversations with the latter often revolved around their work, their professional perspectives. The former, however, were often encountered at a particularly vulnerable moment in their lives. I attempted to approach this with respect and to avoid asking people more than was necessary for the purposes of the research. While personal histories occasionally came up in conversation, I did not consistently probe into questions such as how someone had become homeless or people's personal problems; what mattered for this project was how individuals experienced co-production.

The same consideration applied when sensitive topics arose during meetings. In such moments, I tried to assess how relevant a topic was to my research and how intrusive it might feel for those concerned to take notes. When appropriate, I would stop typing altogether or visibly close my laptop, signaling that a particular conversation or story was off the record. Balancing, on the one hand, a certain ethical restraint, and on the other hand, the ethnographic principle of immersion, in my choosing not to request to sleep in shelters. At such moments, I felt that the relationship of trust had not yet fully developed; I also wished to avoid occupying a bed in a space where capacity was limited, and I considered it an intrusion into others' personal space. At the same time, this decision likely meant that I missed certain insights into the self-management programs that might have emerged through deeper immersion.

4.5 Epistemology and research quality

The epistemological starting point of this dissertation is what has been described as *subtle realism* (Hammersley 1992; Seale 1999; 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 16). This position seeks a pragmatic middle ground between positivism and constructivism. Subtle realism acknowledges that research is never fully detached from the world in which it takes place, nor from the researcher's own background and involvement. Data are not neutral reflections of reality; they emerge through choices about what to observe, how to ask questions, and how to document and interpret events. Still, subtle realism holds on to the aspiration of accuracy. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019, 16) write: *"To say that our findings, and even our data, are constructed or constituted through these processes does not imply that they [...] cannot represent social phenomena accurately."* Similarly, Seale (1999, 470) adds that *"knowledge is always mediated by preexisting ideas and values, whether this is acknowledged by researchers or not. Yet, some accounts are more plausible than others, and human communities in practice have created reasonably firm grounds on which plausibility can be judged."*

The central concern in subtle realism is therefore the relationship between claims and evidence (Seale 1999, 71). Research accounts that make claims about social reality should provide supporting evidence, with the recognition that such evidence is always provisional and subject to revision in light of new data. From this perspective, both positivist techniques and interpretivist techniques have the potential to strengthen research. I will therefore mainly focus on the techniques employed in order to enhance the plausibility of my analysis and conclusions.

Specifically, I employed two main techniques to enhance the quality of this research. First, I used triangulation of both methods and data sources. Multiple methods were employed for data collection (observations, interviews, and document analysis), and I also relied on multiple data sources. For instance, I did not only interview social workers but also service users, organizational managers, municipal policy advisors, and other actors in the frontline environments of the initiatives. This has deepened and enriched my understanding of the cases I studied.

Second, I conducted recurrent member checks to verify the plausibility of my findings. Respondents generally recognized the main findings, which strengthens confidence that these interpretations are plausible. While these techniques do not, in a positivistic sense, produce convergence toward an ultimate truth (Seale 2011), they can help to strengthen research quality.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach used to address the central question of under which conditions co-production with vulnerable citizens can be successful. Drawing on comparative ethnography and a logic of contrastive explanation, I combined document analysis, participant observation, interviews, and member checks across two homeless service providers. This approach is designed to capture the co-production efforts as designed, the everyday practice of co-production, and the meanings participants attach to them. The analysis followed an abductive logic, moving iteratively between fieldwork and theory, to explore how co-production initiatives unfold in practice and explain under which conditions they succeed.

The next part of this dissertation moves to the empirical analysis to address these questions. First, however, the next chapter provides the necessary background by sketching the context in which this research took place.



Chapter 5.

Introducing the context and cases:
Two homeless service providers,
four co-productions

In Chapter 3, I already noted the importance of the sociopolitical context *where* co-production takes place (Steiner et al. 2023). In this chapter, I therefore turn to the context in which the co-production programs are situated. I first discuss the policy field in which NuNN and DRG are situated. Next, I discuss how the organizations developed over time, how their homeless services are organized, and how the co-production programs came to occupy a place within these broader organizational arrangements. As we will see, both initiatives started as civil society responses to unresolved social problems that positioned themselves, at least initially, against government inaction, yet over time they became supported and institutionalized within local welfare and homelessness policies. These histories provide the background needed to understand both organizations' identities and cultures, and ultimately how co-production takes shape in practice in the empirical chapters that follow.

5.1 The policy field: Homeless services

5.1.1 Homelessness in the Netherlands

This research is situated within the field of Dutch homelessness services. Between 2009 and 2024, the number of people experiencing homelessness roughly doubled from approximately 18,000 to 33,000 individuals, according to official estimates (CBS 2025). However, many practitioners and researchers argue that these estimates substantially understate the scope of the problem. The official figures exclude several groups, such as children, adolescents, people over 65, and undocumented migrants.

Actual counts based on the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) reveal that homelessness is both more widespread and more diverse than official estimates suggest. In 57 municipalities in the Netherlands alone (representing a combined population of roughly 4 million), 28,721 homeless and houseless people were counted, including approximately 4,000 children (Kuijpers et al. 2025). These findings underscore that homelessness is a much broader phenomenon than the traditional stereotype of solitary men with mental health or substance use issues. The affected population includes employed individuals, families with children, and people who became homeless following life events such as divorce. Overall, these counts suggest that homelessness is, first and foremost, a housing problem rather than solely a care or treatment problem (see e.g., Colburn and Aldern 2022).

While the broader definition includes many groups, the population specifically targeted by emergency homelessness services is narrower and often characterized by high vulnerability. Of the nearly 29,000 people counted in the ETHOS study, 2,393 were unsheltered, 1,392 were in emergency shelters, and 4,268 were in temporary accommodation. This subset often faces complex, intersecting challenges, and can be seen as especially vulnerable. In Dutch shelters, people with mental health problems, substance use disorders, serious physical health issues, and intellectual disabilities are overrepresented (De Wit et al. 2023). Indeed, the presence of such vulnerabilities is sometimes used as a selection criterion for access to shelters. Consequently, the target group of emergency shelters can be described as particularly vulnerable. For instance, Schel et al. (2023) show that approximately 40 percent of people presenting at Dutch shelters in 2011 reported experiencing childhood abuse.

5.1.2 Homeless shelter services

The primary national policy framework underpinning homelessness services is the Social Support Act 2015 (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning 2015*, Wmo 2015). Under this law, every municipality bears the responsibility for providing shelter to people experiencing homelessness. While the law encourages and expects regional cooperation – within so-called ‘center municipality’ arrangements – the responsibility lies at the municipal level. The Social Support Act epitomizes the shift from a traditional welfare state to a ‘participation state’ (e.g., Nederhand and Van Meerkerk 2018). It places strong emphasis on people’s self-reliance and on stimulating individuals to draw on and develop their own strengths.

The concepts of vulnerability and self-reliance are central to this policy. As discussed in Chapter 2, vulnerability can operate as a sorting mechanism to determine access to services. This is particularly visible in Dutch homelessness services. Whether people gain access to emergency shelters often depends on how vulnerable they are judged to be. In the explanatory memorandum of the Wmo 2015, the target group of shelter services is described as “*people who no longer have a home and are not able to cope on their own*” (41). In other words, strictly speaking, according to the law, ‘just’ being homeless is insufficient to qualify for shelter. In practice, this means that people experiencing homelessness without psychiatric or substance use-related problems are sometimes denied access to shelters, leaving them with limited support (e.g., Schuurs and Tielbeke 2017; Van Tongerloo 2023; Boesveldt and Lomans 2024). In such cases, vulnerability becomes a mechanism for allocating a scarce number of shelter beds. Homelessness services are sometimes described as the “*drain*” of the welfare system (Schuurs and Tielbeke 2017), where complex problems concentrate that could not be resolved elsewhere.

Although there is now a more differentiated range of services for different groups of people experiencing homelessness – for example, municipalities increasingly provide specific services to homeless people without complex care problems or specifically to homeless non-Dutch EU citizens – shelters are still often intended for people who are assumed not only to have a housing problem, but a range of often complex problems.

Recent developments and ambitions for co-production

In recent years, the field of homelessness has undergone substantial change. In line with other EU member states, the Netherlands has committed itself through the Lisbon Declaration to the goal of ending homelessness by 2030. In the Dutch context, this has been translated into the National Action Plan on Homelessness (*Nationaal Actieplan Dakloosheid*, NAD), developed through co-creation between national ministries, municipalities, service providers, and people with lived experience of homelessness. The plan explicitly calls for a paradigm shift: homelessness should be approached first and foremost as a housing problem, rather than primarily as a care or treatment problem.

Such an action plan is a soft policy instrument, articulated through administrative agreements (*Bestuurlijke afspraken*) among the relevant actors (Rijksoverheid 2026). These serve as working agreements between actors, rather than legal rules. Their effect is primarily political and grounded in administrative norms. In the agreements accompanying the NAD, the parties commit to shared action lines, roles, and responsibilities, endorsed by the relevant ministries (particularly the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations; and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment) as well as umbrella organizations representing municipalities and service providers.

Within this new approach, ambitions for co-production are pronounced. One of the central action lines in the NAD concerns integrating lived experience throughout the entire policy cycle, at both local and national levels. This includes efforts to involve people with lived experience not only in consultation and advisory bodies, but also more directly in the development, implementation, and evaluation of services.

At the same time, ambitions regarding co-production are visible in the practices of many service providers delivering homelessness services on behalf of municipalities. There is an increasing shift toward Housing First, for example, rest on the principle that people experiencing homelessness should be enabled to participate autonomously in decisions affecting their lives (Boesveldt 2024; Housing First Nederland 2026). Furthermore, shelter providers increasingly use strength-focused

approaches (e.g., Wolf et al. 2018) that treat clients' self-direction as a crucial ingredient of recovery. Self-managed homeless shelters, in which service users are intensively involved in running and managing the shelter, offer another example (e.g., Huber 2021). In addition, many organizations in this field facilitate client participation and representation through councils and advisory bodies inspired by the Dutch Law on client participation in care institutions (*Wet medezeggenschap cliënten zorginstellingen*, Wmcz 2018). Although social support organizations are not always formally required to adhere to this framework, many nonetheless follow its principles in organizing client representation.

Against this backdrop of growing ambitions to integrate lived experience and expand co-production, this dissertation focuses on two service providers that have developed relatively far-reaching forms of user involvement within Dutch homelessness services. The next section introduces these organizations and traces how their co-production programs emerged over time.

5.2 The organizations

5.2.1 NuNN: Born from necessity

On the night of 5 February 1996, a group of homeless people squatted an old, abandoned cinema. This initiative became known as *Nachtopvang uit Noodzaak Nijmegen* (*Night Shelter out of Necessity Nijmegen*) or NuNN. The emergence of this self-managed shelter is a story of dissatisfaction and conflict, but also of unlikely coalition-building and pragmatic problem-solving. The idea of self-managed shelters emerged from a persistent shortage of shelter capacity and frustration with regular shelter providers' paternalistic approaches to care (Nuy 1999, 222-223; for similar experiences in Utrecht, see Van Doorn 2002, 152-156).

In the early 1990s, Nijmegen's homeless service offerings consisted of two daytime drop-in centers and a night shelter. These facilities were broadly seen as insufficient and lacking in availability, accessibility, safety, and autonomy for their users. Since 1991, a local working group in the city, consisting of homeless people and social workers, had advocated for improved and expanded shelter services for the homeless (De Gelderlander 1995b). One member of the working group explained that at the only night shelter in town, "you can stay (...) for a maximum of five nights. After that, you're kicked back onto the streets. With a permanent night shelter, that's one less major concern for us. Instead of spending our energy looking for a place to sleep, we can focus on building a different life and maybe even start looking for work."

Recounting his experiences at this shelter, another man stated: *“You have to pay 7.50 guilders⁹ per night. Not everyone can afford that. Moreover, you're only allowed to stay for five nights per month. The dormitories are extremely noisy, and you practically have to tie your belongings to yourself, or they'll be stolen”* (De Gelderlander 1995c). The working group's objective was twofold: the creation of a new homeless shelter in the city that provided indefinite residence, run by the users themselves. A similar initiative already arose in 1994 in Utrecht and served as an example.

Municipal plans to create additional shelter capacity had been made in these years, yet they always seemed to run into opposition from potential neighbors or funding constraints. Obviously, this municipal lack of capacity to act was a problem most urgently experienced by the homeless sleeping rough on the streets. Still, increasingly, this became a problem for the broader public and other stakeholders, such as law enforcement. This even sparked some light institutional resistance to the municipality, as a policeman describes in an interview in Box 5.1 below.

Box 5.1 Send them to city hall

No shelter? Send them to city hall

“At the time, I was a community police officer in the city center, and we had many issues with homeless people, tons of reports. They were sleeping everywhere, in parking garages. There were still a lot of heroin addicts, back then, shooting up in every corner. The public doesn't want to be confronted with that. It's not such a big deal if someone sleeps in your doorway, but when you wake up in the morning and there's a big pile of shit – well, that's different. We'd get reports about disturbances, drug addicts sleeping out together in small groups, making noise, fighting over drugs, or stealing things from each other – there were no shelters for them. The only places we had were *De Hulsen* [far from the city center] and *Het Kasteel*, which was only open during the day (...).

We told the municipality it had to do something about it because, as the police, we had so much work to deal with it. (...) We reported to the municipality that they needed to act. The city of Nijmegen thought that *Het Kasteel* and the shelters in the bigger cities were enough. Nijmegen didn't see it as a problem. So, we sent all the homeless people staying in the city center to the gardens of city hall. Back then, it was a walled garden where the civil servants would go to eat their lunch, and suddenly they were confronted with vagrants sitting there, drinking beer, defecating in the bushes, and sleeping under the eaves of city hall – there were all these odd little tents there. Then they started calling us:

⁹ Equivalent to €6,62 in 2024 (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/prijzen-toen-en-nu>)

'You need to deal with this disturbance.' No, you need to deal with the problem." (R3 – text condensed)

Still, municipal efforts to improve the situation seemed to run into the same barriers time and again, resulting in little actual change, despite their intentions. This meant that homeless people slept outside again in the cold winter of 1995-1996. This dire situation prompted an – on first sight – unlikely coalition to take matters into its own hands. On the night of 6 February 1996, a group of homeless people, squatters, and other sympathizers occupied an abandoned building to start their own homeless shelter. Two days later, the story in Box 5.2 opened the local newspaper's front page:

Box 5.2 Newspaper article about a squatted cinema (Steenbergen 1996b, translated, text condensed).

5

'Is there anyone here who's very homeless?' Former cinema Groenestraat squatted by a pact of homeless people and squatters

It had been brewing for weeks that the homeless in Nijmegen, still left on the streets at night, would no longer tolerate the situation. Squatting seemed to be the only solution, and yesterday morning, it finally happened.

Behind the houses on the Groenestraat, near the church, lies a hidden little building. It's said to have once been a cinema and was later used as a community center. It's been unmistakably abandoned for years: the locks are rusted, and rotting boards cover the windows.

Around fifty to sixty squatters gathered there in the freezing cold for a lightning-quick action to give the men and women from the streets a roof over their heads. It's a highly diverse group, an unusual alliance brought together for a common cause. Jos Palts, the group's leader, has about 15 homeless people in tow, while a squatters group has sent around 30 participants. There is also a handful of addiction care workers and even employees from the existing homeless center, *De Hulsen*. Father Fons, for instance, is standing at a distance, nodding approvingly, and has promised to go on a candle hunt to better light the space. Father Jan from the *Goede Herderkerk* is not present but has sent a message of support.

The actual squatting of the building is a piece of cake, and in no time, the entire procession can march inside. Illuminated by flashlights and tea lights, mattresses, radiators, blankets, and sleeping bags are rolled out, tables and chairs are set up, and the boards covering a window are pried loose. A few guys inspect the toilets, which don't seem to be working. By this time, it is about to

inform ‘the cops’ about the recent events. A portable phone appears, and Jos is ready to handle that task outside.

In reaction, last night, alderman Hompe stated that he had personally assessed the situation at the Groenestraat. He noted that the building has been vacant for at least a year and that there is no risk of collapse or another reason for the municipality to intervene immediately. What that will lead to, he does not yet know. However, he does understand that not all homeless people can be accommodated at De Hulsen, and that even in this kind of care, the principle of ‘care tailored to individual needs’ should apply.

The months after the squat, a heated public debate ensued. Three local religious leaders, in particular, voiced their support in the newspapers. The weeks after the squat, a pastor collected 1,500 signatures supporting the homeless squatters, which the working group presented to the alderman (Ploeger 1996). There were also opponents. Some residents expressed concerns about criminal activities in and around the squatted building. Additionally, the property owner wanted to have the building vacated. In response to these reports, the mayor told the local newspaper that there was a “*concerning and threatening situation*” around the shelter involving “*theft, burglary, prostitution, and drug and alcohol use*” (De Gelderlander 1996d). Supporters of the initiative dismissed these concerns as largely unfounded (Steenbergen 1996a). These issues were smoothed over after a meeting between the task force and the municipality. It also became clear that some political leaders were sympathetic to the project (De Gelderlander 1996a). The local alderman Hompe voiced his support for the experimental self-managed shelter. Still, the alderman stated that “*Politically, there are very different opinions on this project. I cannot guarantee that there will be an experimental night shelter, but I promise that I will table a proposal for it*” (De Gelderlander 1996b).

What proved vital in generating the municipality’s support for the initiative was the group of – in policymakers’ opinions – legitimate sympathizers around it. Soon after its start, a group of a local care organization’s director, together with a lawyer, social workers, and the street pastorate, started to support and represent the self-managed initiative toward policymakers and neighbors. Ten years later, Mayor d’Hondt wrote in one of NuNN’s internal publications that: “*I was initially skeptical of this request. (...) But in 1996, the homeless were not alone in their ambition to bring self-management to life. My skepticism faded when it became clear that there was a strong combination of a solid supervisory board, committed supporters, and motivated homeless individuals. I must say, it made a deep impression on me at the time. The entire initiative commanded respect and trust.*”

In September of that same year, the city council debated the proposal to fund a pilot project for a self-managed night shelter. Some council members did not believe the self-management concept was feasible with the target group or at the proposed location (Municipality of Nijmegen 1996). Proponents, however, argued that the initiative's leaders deserved a chance; the group had worked hard to win its neighbors' sympathy and had proven itself a reliable dialogue partner. Furthermore, the concept of self-management, through the personal responsibility that participants take on, was believed to contribute to their reintegration and the general emancipation of the homeless population. A majority of the city council approved the proposal: the municipality would provide a location for the project and fund hiring professional support staff.

However, the location of this new shelter remained contentious. Some political parties opposed the shelter in the city center. Neighbors of the municipally assigned location united, as a newspaper article characterized the neighbors' opinions at city hall, where they presented 700 signatures of people opposing the location of the experimental shelter: *"That night shelter deserves a chance," was the dominant opinion, 'but not in our neighborhood with so many schools, a nursing home, a train station, a bowling alley, and a student campus'"* (De Gelderlander 1996e). The residents filed a lawsuit, after which the judge ruled that the municipality must stop the establishment of the new night shelter at that location. Unexpectedly, the homeless still spent their Christmas of 1996 in the decaying, cold, and drafty building (De Gelderlander 1996f) that would be later described as *"a wreck so run-down it wouldn't even pass as an animal shelter"* (Nuy 1998, 222, translated).

In 1997, the city council designated a building in the city center. The building, covering over 300 square meters across two connected floors, offered space for 10 rooms with 23 beds. The new location was considered a *"palace"* – especially compared to the squatted building (De Gelderlander 1997c).

Subsequent years

The move marked a new phase for the NuNN: the initiators now had their shelter location and could focus on further developing their self-management model (De Gelderlander 1997b). Initially, residents, shopkeepers, and business owners did not exactly applaud the arrival of a homeless shelter in their neighborhood. However, in these first years, the shelter gained some trust from its neighbors (De Gelderlander 1997d). The public nuisance caused by the shelter was limited, prompting the municipality to extend its stay at the current location (De Gelderlander 1997e; 1998c). Organizationally, the initiative was structured under a *Foundation of Homeless Self-Management Activities*. The director of a local care organization served as its

supervisory board, but the NuNN continued to operate independently through a self-management model. The municipality subsidized this foundation and attracted additional funds from charities and client user fees.

It is difficult to overstate the innovative and radically different character of the shelter during this period compared to other shelters. At this shelter, people had a fixed sleeping place for as many nights as needed, whereas other shelters had a maximum number per month. At NuNN, people could stay inside during the daytime as long as they had a job or actively participated in self-management. Shelter providers often catered to the logic of control (Van Doorn 2002). This was reflected in the many shelters that had zero-tolerance policies toward drugs and alcohol and the professional security guards present in shelters who could frisk clients and/or search their belongings. In contrast, NuNN focused on providing client autonomy and influence and had a more laissez-faire approach to drug and alcohol use. Moreover, both managing security and rule formulation and enforcement were in the participants' hands.

In the following years, the municipality faced challenges navigating its role within NuNN's unconventional governance system, as it was held accountable for the shelter's issues. At the same time, decision-making rested with the homeless people who ran the shelter. This led to recurrent public commotion and necessitated the city government to take positions about the shelter's actions, for instance, about the target group that was entitled to stay in the shelter or whether dogs should be allowed in the shelter (De Gelderlander 1997a; Hermans 2003). This led to a conflict between the shelter and the municipality. Based on informal complaints of local entrepreneurs, the city accused the shelter of bad administration, allowing entrance for too many people and dogs, and causing disturbance due to alcohol use among service users (De Gelderlander 2004). While a social worker at NuNN and the police denied these accusations, the municipality requested that NuNN be placed under the supervision of another homeless care provider in the city in 2004. Still, the city government remained supportive of the self-management model.

After talks with multiple local service providers, NuNN decided to work with a larger social care provider, the *Regionale Instelling Beschermd Wonen Nijmegen & Rivierenland* (*Regional Institution for Supported Housing Nijmegen and Rivierenland*, RIBW). This was the organization led by the care director that (voluntarily) served as the supervisory board of NuNN (RIBW Nijmegen Rivierenland n.d.). It was agreed that NuNN would retain control over its primary process, while the organization would play a facilitative role, managing subsidy relations, human resources, and safety regulations. The shelter has functioned according to this construction since 2006.

The shelter today

In the subsequent years, the shelter has become an integral part of the region's homeless service system. The municipality rents the shelter accommodation and provides NuNN with a yearly subsidy (via the supporting organization) to provide homeless shelter and transitional housing. The shelter has room for 24 people. The organization also rents three houses from social housing corporations, providing transitional housing for seven shelter users. Furthermore, the shelter provides financial administration services for current and former service users who apply for this, which is about 30 in total.¹⁰ Five professional social workers work at the shelter, totaling 3.1 full-time equivalents (FTEs). Some social workers combine their function at the shelter with a part-time function at the same supporting organization as ambulatory care professionals. Additionally, the team usually employs one or two interns at any given time. About 80 individuals typically use the shelter and transitional housing facilities each year. Some people use the shelter only for a few days or weeks, whereas others use it for multiple years.

5.2.2 The roots of De Regenboog Groep

DRG had its origins in the 1970s, when Amsterdam became a popular stop for young travelers on the Hippie Trail (De Regenboog Groep n.d.). The city attracted thousands, many of whom ended up sleeping on the Dam right by the national war monument. The so-called 'Dam sleepers' could number in the thousands on busy nights. This did not sit well with the local authorities, and on August 25, marines cleared the Dam. To manage the situation, the city allowed young people to camp in the Vondelpark, where they could stay from May to September. For a while, this seemed like a successful solution. The park was filled with people sleeping under the open sky, away from the city's main tourist spots. But as the hash was increasingly swapped for heroin, little was left of the carefree atmosphere by the end of 1974: *"The population of the park consisted of a sad army of homeless people, runaway youth, and drop-outs from the Netherlands and abroad"* (Blok 2011, 182). The heroin epidemic was in full swing, and Amsterdam saw a rise in addiction levels, particularly among Surinamese immigrants – about a third of Suriname's population emigrated to the Netherlands in this period, around the country's declaration of independence in 1975. These groups were in desperate situations and remained overlooked by mainstream social services.

¹⁰ Additionally, two of NuNN's social workers run a self-managed assisted living facility in neighboring town. This facility shelters older formerly homeless people. This facility, however, is outside the scope of this dissertation.

A group of local religious leaders founded *De Regenboog* (*The Rainbow*) in 1975 to address this. From its start, the organization had a religious foundation, reflected in its name, which refers to the biblical story of the flood, “symbolizing God’s mercy and faithfulness” (Wouters 2000, 31-32). The name was also chosen for its inclusive connotations, representing people of all nationalities, cultures, and mentalities without pretention. The mission of *De Regenboog* was “to help those who have no helper,” focusing on society’s most vulnerable groups (Ibidem). The organization adopted a method of outreach care, focusing on establishing contact with the target group and accepting their addiction as part of the process (Wouters 2000, 202; Blok 2011, 202). In doing so, the organization sought cooperation with the city government of Amsterdam but was also prepared to organize protest actions when deemed necessary (see Box 5.3).

Over the following decades, the organization grew, focusing primarily on people with addictions who fell through the cracks with other service providers. The organization offered shelters for addicts, street outreach, needle exchange (in response to the AIDS epidemic), buddy care for those with both addiction and AIDS, and education and prevention programs. Their approach was distinctly pragmatic, aiming to provide low-threshold services dispersed across the city.

From the late 1990s onward, drug-related issues began to subside in intensity. Alongside individuals with addiction, the organization started to extend support to others marginalized by mainstream services. In the early 2000s, *De Regenboog* underwent significant expansions and service transformations. The organization, for instance, merged with an informal care provider and various drop-in center providers in the city, broadening its reach and resources, and officially changed its name to *De Regenboog Groep* (DRG). Over time, DRG’s organizational identity also shifted from Christian welfare work toward a more secular and pluralistic civic organization – partly due to mergers and broader societal secularization. While its faith-based roots still matter in some practical ways (e.g., continued ties to churches and charitable support), the organization today primarily presents itself through a social engagement aimed at reaching people who fall through the cracks of mainstream services.

Today, the organization has a broader target group and a wider range of services. It targets people in and around Amsterdam who experience(d) homelessness, poverty, addiction, psychiatry, delinquency, who have fled their unsafe home country, domestic violence, and who suffer from social isolation (De Regenboog Groep 2024). At the end of 2023, the organization had 373 employees (about 280 FTE) and 1500

Box 5.3 Squatting the Doelengebouw**Squatting the Doelengebouw**

While the young organization of *De Regenboog* consistently sought cooperation with the municipality to pursue its mission, it also protested what it perceived as injustice. An example of this is the squatting of a building in 1979. At this moment, a large group of emaciated, addicted Surinamese people suddenly found themselves homeless after the city government closed an occupied building where the group had been living. Reverend Wouters, co-founder of *De Regenboog*, later recalled:

“By the end of 1979, De Regenboog was confronted with the critical situation of a large group of young Surinamese drug users. They were called de Zwerfgroep [‘the Tramp Group’] (...). As these youths increasingly caused disturbances around the Zeedijk area, it triggered a police crackdown. They found temporary shelter in a large, vacant building. The dealers were the overlords in this massive building across from the mayor’s residence on the Herengracht. Passersby clutched their bags in fear. This couldn’t go on – there was no disagreement about that. But what should be done?” (Wouters 2000, 74).

De Regenboog decided to act on behalf of the group, staying true to their mission of “helping those who have no helper.” They organized protest demonstrations at City Hall against the impending eviction of the building on the Herengracht, as no alternative shelter had been arranged (later, Wouters would discover that many demonstrators were incentivized by the local Surinamese ‘Godfather’ who promised a gram of free heroin for all who followed this religious long-bearded ‘Mozes’ to City Hall).

In the meantime, *De Regenboog* developed a plan to focus specifically on assisting the younger Surinamese drug users. After a meeting with the city government that, according to representatives of *De Regenboog* and the Surinamese group, made little progress, they decided to put their ‘shadow plan’ into action. They squatted a building on the Kloveniersburgwal, as reported by *Vrij Nederland* on February 24, 1979: *“In the adjacent De Regenboog building, Reverend Wouters led the vanguard in prayer. Armed with crowbars, they entered the Stadsdoelen via the roof gutters and the bricked-up door. The group waiting on Stadhouderskade received the codeword by phone: ‘jumbo jet.’ Vans then transported the addicts to the Stadsdoelen.”* (cited in Wouters 2000, 74–81). About a thousand, mainly Surinamese, addicts would register as inhabitants of the building (Blok 2011, 210).



Picture: Reverend Wouters, co-founder of De Regenboog, during the squat of a building (Amsterdam City Archive).

volunteers. The organization provides services such as informal care, social work, temporary housing, drop-in centers, and night shelters for the homeless. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has also increasingly focused on offering emergency shelter for Ukrainian refugees.

A substantial part of the organization still focuses on services for homeless people, particularly daytime shelter. The organization has nine drop-in centers in Amsterdam and one in the neighboring city of Zaanstad. These centers provide users with free meals, coffee and tea, access to showers, and opportunities to swap clothes. Most centers also offer night shelter during winter. Operating from a harm-reduction approach, some of the drop-in centers have designated spaces for safe drug use.

When individuals first arrive at the drop-in centers, they are registered and have an intake meeting with one of the organization's social workers. After this, however, people can use the drop-in centers freely; the use of the social work services is voluntary. About half of the 5000 yearly individual visitors use this (De Regenboog Groep 2019). The municipalities of Amsterdam and Zaandam fund the drop-in centers under the Dutch Social Support Act. In addition, the organization receives private donations, which allow the drop-in centers to expand their range of services. For example, facilities like showers and meals are not covered by municipal funding but are made possible through the private donations and gifts the organization receives.

Over the past 25 years, DRG has steadily increased the role of service users in the work of its drop-in centers. Today, these centers engage service users in co-production in three main ways: through visitor-volunteers, client councils, and, more recently, self-management. Some locations – before they became part of DRG – already involved visitors in practical tasks such as cleaning and cooking, partly because they lacked resources to employ additional staff. For DRG as a merged organization, a more explicit shift began around 2007, when it adopted a policy of giving service users a greater role in day-to-day work at the drop-in centers, formalized as the model of *'meewerkend bezoekers'* (visitor-volunteers). Involving service users in decision-making started earlier, around 2001, in an ad hoc way around the renovation of a drop-in center. In subsequent years, this was formalized into a regular client council structure. I return to the design of these different co-production arrangements in the next chapter.

The most recent co-production program is the *Nachtopvang in Zelfbeheer* (Self-Managed Night Shelter, NOIZ¹¹). The idea emerged in September 2019, when a manager of a drop-in center hired one of its visitor-volunteers as a doorman, even though he was still homeless. While the arrangement worked during the day, it became problematic at night: when all staff went home, the doorman returned to the streets, even though the center itself – with kitchens, toilets, showers, and ample space – remained unused. This situation prompted the idea of creating a small-scale night shelter, run by the people who use it and operating without professional staff on site. The pilot started in December 2019 and, over the next five years, was gradually expanded to eight of the organization's locations. The next chapter analyses in more detail how this self-managed model was designed and formalized within DRG.

11. This name was based on that of the first Dutch self-managed night shelter, based in Utrecht

Chapter overview

This chapter has sketched a historical background of the two service providers at the center of this dissertation, NuNN and DRG. Both emerged in response to problems deemed insufficiently solved by the state and existing service providers. NuNN was started in part by homeless people themselves, who created a self-managed shelter in response to inadequate shelter facilities. DRG has its roots in Christian values and seeks to provide non-judgmental services to vulnerable groups that fall through the cracks. At NuNN, the self-managed initiative evolved into a co-production between service users and social workers. Over the years, DRG created multiple co-production programs for people experiencing homelessness.

The next chapter builds on this background and examines how co-production is formally designed within NuNN and DRG. It analyzes the programs' structures – who is involved, in what ways, and why – and thereby prepares the ground for later chapters that examine how these intentions play out in practice.

Empirical section I: Intentions and practice



Chapter 6.

Co-production as intended

This chapter examines how co-production is formally designed within NuNN and DRG. The central question is: *How do these organizations intend to involve service users in the co-production of homeless services?* To answer this question, I analyze the structure of their co-production programs as laid out in official documents and organizational materials. Later empirical chapters then examine how these designs are enacted in day-to-day practice.

To do so, I conceptualize co-production programs along three key dimensions – who, what, and why – following Nabatchi et al. (2017) and Steiner et al. (2023). These dimensions help clarify the intended roles of service users and professionals, the activities and responsibilities involved, and the organizational motivations that underpin these programs. An overview of the dimensions and their indicators are provided in Table 6.1 below.

Table 6.1 Dimensions of co-production programs

Dimension	Subdimension
<i>Who</i>	Target group
	Participant roles
	Professional roles
<i>What</i>	Participants' tasks and responsibilities
	Participants' decision-making powers
	Professionals' activities
<i>Why</i>	Rationale
	Embedded incentives to elicit participation
	Intended benefits

The chapter begins by analyzing NuNN's approach to self-management, and subsequently analyzes DRG's co-production initiatives: the visitor-volunteer program, the client council, and the self-management program. After analyzing all programs as designed, this chapter steps back to examine the most central differences between them.

6.1 NuNN

6.1.1 Self-Management

Who

The shelter targets adult homeless men who qualify for municipal shelter services, aimed at *“people with complex psychological, psychosocial, and/or addiction problems that are so severe that they no longer have a roof over their heads and are unable, either on their own or with help from their network or lighter forms of support, to get their situation sufficiently back on track to manage in society again”* (Municipality of Nijmegen 2024, chap. 4.2). Within this general target group, the shelter expects service users to have a baseline level of self-reliance due to the limited availability of professional support and the absence of security personnel. Therefore, the shelter’s target group can be described as having complex problems, but not to the extent that it requires continuous supervision or care. While it does not outright exclude men aged 18 to 23, they are first expected to contact specialized providers for young people.

Within this group of shelter users, the program does not impose additional formal criteria for becoming an active co-producer. All users of the shelter are free to put themselves forward. Whether they are allowed to take on an active co-production role is ultimately decided by the current group of participants, consisting of task volunteers and managers.

Service users can take on three roles in the shelter: guest, task volunteer, or manager. Guests have a fixed sleeping place for an indefinite period and make use of the municipally mandated homeless shelter without taking on co-production responsibilities. They pay a user fee of about €170 per month but are not expected to contribute to the shelter’s functioning. New service users always start as guests and can apply to become task volunteers after an initial period. Volunteers are residents who take on regular shifts in the shelter’s daily operations. Managers are former volunteers who have moved into “manager apartments” that NuNN rents from local housing corporations. They are expected to show greater responsibility and independence, including being capable of living (semi-)independently. At any given time, the program aims to involve roughly 14 to 17 co-producers (volunteers and managers combined).

While the term self-management may suggest an independent endeavor by the shelter users, the process is intensively supported by five social workers. In the shelter, however, they take on an explicitly facilitative role. The social workers are at

the shelter during office hours (usually, about two or three social workers are present on a workday). While the social workers have different task emphases in their daily work, their core role is similar. There are no formal hierarchical differences between the social workers.

What

Regarding the what-dimension, co-producer activities include running three eight-hour shifts per week. The day shift runs from 10:00 to 18:00, the evening shift from 18:00 to 02:00, and the night shift from 02:00 to 10:00, with volunteers and managers working in pairs. In total, the program schedules 42 shifts per week, which are covered by the volunteers and managers. During these shifts, participants carry out basic household tasks in the shelter, such as cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking, and managing the entrance. In addition, the participants on duty are primarily responsible for enforcing rules on safety, hygiene, and orderliness.

The self-management model also gives participants significant decision-making powers, especially about internal affairs. This involves formulating, applying, and enforcing the rules in the shelter (see Appendix 5), for instance, by issuing warnings or even suspensions. Furthermore, co-producers manage participation: they decide whether prospective guests receive a place in the shelter, which guests can become task volunteers, and which task volunteers get promoted to manager.¹² Such decisions are made at the weekly residents' meeting, which is open to all social workers and co-producers. This functions as the central decision-making venue of the co-production. The agenda of the meetings provides attention to the following topics: the functioning of volunteers and (new) guests, financial affairs, safety and hygiene issues at the shelter, policy developments, the schedule of the upcoming week's shifts, and, possibly, if and how guests or participants should be sanctioned. Co-producers decide by majority vote, with a minimum quorum of five votes. Social workers prepare the agenda for these meetings and serve as facilitators. They guide discussions, prepare the meeting agenda, and ensure the schedule for the upcoming week's shifts is complete. The social workers can advise the group, but they do not vote.

¹² The *Centrale Toegang Maatschappelijke Opvang* (CTMO, or Central Access to Social Shelter), a division of the local *Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst* (GGD, Municipal Health Service), is responsible for determining who qualifies for municipal shelter services based on local policy guidelines. While NuNN has autonomy to refuse or ban certain service users, it does not have the authority to independently decide eligibility for shelter. This means that even if NuNN is willing to accept someone, the final decision rests with the GGD-CTMO, which may still deny them access to shelter services in the municipality or suggest that they go to a shelter that better fits their needs.

Relating to social workers' other activities, their main task is to assist the residents' group. The social workers monitor the objectives of NuNN, manage income administration, and provide support where needed, tailored to the needs of the residents' group (NuNN, 2025).

Why

This also relates to the rationale behind co-production. As discussed in the sketch of NuNN's history, the shelter was founded with two main objectives: to provide a place that catered to the needs and wishes of homeless people, and to empower them in the service process to support their reintegration into society. The underlying theory of change is that participation in self-management can help people (re)discover and develop their talents and qualities, while also fostering a sense of usefulness for themselves and others.

The program structure provides several incentives for service users to participate. The program, firstly, relies on extrinsic rewards, by allowing task volunteers to be able to stay inside during the daytime (as opposed to guests) and offering the possibility to move on to the shared-living facilities for managers, which is an essential incentive, as well as the possibility for managers to qualify for social housing after two years of successful managership. The program also provides non-material rewards. For instance, the tasks involved in co-production and the opportunities for influence can foster intrinsic motivation among participants (e.g., a sense of self-determination and development). Finally, the group aspect of the co-production can be seen as a social incentive, as the program aims to create opportunities for peer support.

The primary intended benefit of the shelter is to provide a safe, stable environment where users can rebuild their lives. The main expected benefit of co-production is that active participation can foster personal growth, which, in turn, supports resocialization and societal reintegration. As stated on the shelter's website: *"NuNN is a self-managed night shelter, which means it is run by the homeless themselves. They are the ones who take on responsibilities and manage the day-to-day operations at NuNN. In this way, they can contribute to their peers, and this sense of contribution helps to enhance their self-esteem"* (NuNN 2025).

6.2 DRG

As described in the historical context, DRG has been an organization driven primarily by volunteers' commitment. From the early 2000s onward, however, there was an

organizational shift from using external volunteers toward making more use of its service users in co-producing the drop-in centers. Around 2007, the organization introduced two programs: its client councils and ‘visitor-volunteers,’ referring to visitors to the drop-in centers who are actively involved in tasks in and around the centers. In 2019, the organization also started a self-managed shelter initiative. Therefore, whereas NuNN embodies a single co-production, at DRG, we can identify multiple co-production programs in and around the organization’s ten drop-in centers for people experiencing homelessness: visitor-volunteers, the client council, and self-management.

6.2.1 Visitor-volunteers

Who

The visitor-volunteer role is targeted at visitors of the drop-in centers. They can apply on their own initiative or be approached by center staff. There is no detailed organizational policy specifying which visitors may become visitor-volunteers beyond two basic criteria: participants must be users of the drop-in centers themselves, and they must be able to assume the responsibilities associated with the role.

Formally, there is one participant role, that of visitor-volunteer, but in practice this role is differentiated by task profile. Visitor-volunteers can generally take on three types of roles in and around the drop-in centers: chef cook, all-round volunteer in the drop-in center, or member of a street-cleaning crew that sweeps the streets of a center’s neighborhood. These roles differ in the activities performed but share the same formal status as visitor-volunteers.

The professionals supporting co-producers are the paid staff at the drop-in centers and the location manager. They are present during opening hours, coordinate the work in the center, and carry final responsibility for the safety and atmosphere in and around the facility.

What

Visitor-volunteers may fulfill many tasks in a center, such as cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, or working behind the bar. Furthermore, the drop-in centers provide shower facilities and the opportunity to swap or wash clothing. Visitor-volunteers can manage these facilities during the day, such as maintaining the shower waiting list. Some drop-in centers also have a street-cleaning crew that goes out into their neighborhood to clean the area. The visitor-volunteer role does not give participants decision-making authority.

As many daily tasks are conducted by co-producing visitors, the employees present are responsible for managing office affairs, such as administration and communications, for personal interaction with visitors of the drop-in center, conducting intake conversations with new service users, and managing and supporting the work of the visitor-volunteers (and in some centers, external volunteers) in the shelter. For the rest, staff generally handle the same tasks as visitor-volunteers. As the organization states in its volunteer policy: *“In a drop-in center, there is, on the surface, no difference between the work of a volunteer and that of a paid staff member. Everyone plays their part.”* More generally, visitor-volunteers are expected to offer a listening ear to service users, contribute to a pleasant and safe atmosphere, and stay alert to any shifts in this atmosphere. However, they are never ultimately responsible. Paid staff bear final responsibility and are expected to support or step in for the volunteer under challenging situations.

Why

The visitor-volunteer program was introduced at the request of both organizational management and service users. The organization noted that a survey revealed that visitors wanted to be more involved in the activities offered at the drop-in centers (De Regenboog Groep 2009, 67). This coincided with a wish of the organizational management, as the director noted: *“We aimed to shift more responsibility for the activities to the visitors themselves, encouraging them to contribute to their personal development actively”* (De Omslag 2009, 11). The main rationale of the program is therefore to give service users greater responsibility in the centers and, through this, to stimulate empowerment and resocialization.

The organization provides several incentives to participate. Participants receive €7 per 4-hour shift, the opportunity to receive training and coaching, and periodic leisure activities for the visitor-volunteers.

The intended benefits of the visitor-volunteer program operate at multiple levels. For participants, the goal is to develop skills and work experience, contributing to their resocialization. For the centers, involving visitor-volunteers is intended to support the day-to-day running of activities and to foster a welcoming and safe atmosphere grounded in a sense of shared responsibility.

6.2.2 Client councils

Who

Participation in the client councils is formally open to all those who visit the organization's drop-in centers or have done so in the past. Their target group thus consists of (formerly) homeless people in and around Amsterdam. In the formal design, recruitment takes place at the level of each drop-in center: visitors and former visitors can put themselves forward as candidates for the location council. Candidate members go through a probationary period covering the first three consecutive meetings of that council. After this period, the council can decide to formally appoint candidate members as full members. When more candidates come forward than there are vacancies, the council organizes elections.

Everyone who participates is a client council member, but there are slight variations in the roles of co-producers that relate to the client council's structure. The client council system uses a tiered participation model, meaning that users are involved in decision-making at three levels of the organization:

- The location council: Each drop-in center has a location council of four to eight members who meet monthly with the location manager.
- The visitors' council: Each local council delegates one or two members to the visitors' council. With ten drop-in centers, the council has ten to twenty members. The council meets monthly with the general manager of the drop-in centers.
- The central council: This council consists of up to ten members who meet with the board of directors. Five of these members are delegates from the visitors' council, and the participants' council delegates up to five others.¹³

This model follows the principle of subsidiarity: the location councils discuss and decide on local matters regarding their drop-in centers; the visitors' council decides on issues concerning all drop-in centers; and the central council decides on general organizational matters.

This client council structure also defines co-producers' roles in the process. Location council members are appointed for a three-year term, which can be extended two times. As stated, each location council appoints up to two persons to represent it on

¹³ The participants' council includes individuals who use the informal care services of DRG. These services differ from the drop-in centers, as they are not specifically aimed at homeless individuals, but for instance at people who need budget assistance or who suffer from social isolation. Therefore, this council is not taken into account.

the visitors' council, which in turn elects five members to represent it at the central level. Furthermore, every council elects a president, with a term of up to 3 years, who can be re-elected once. The hierarchical model means that the co-producers, active in the central council, are also active in the visitors' council and a local council. Furthermore, the visitors' council and the central council have elected boards that prepare the meetings and oversee the payment of a financial attendance allowance to their members.

There are multiple 'professional' roles. As the organizational members are the dialogue partners of the councils, the organization facilitates independent external support of the councils. The central council, visitors' council, and participants' council are supported by a professional advisor who helps to prepare and facilitate the meetings, and a professional minute-taker. Volunteers are responsible for this at the location level. The full structure of the client councils is summarized in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Structure of the client councils

Level	Number of members	Represents	Discussion partner	Support
Location Councils	4-8 per council	Visitors of a particular drop-in center	Location manager	Voluntary notetakers and/or support
Visitors' Council	10-20	Location councils	General manager of drop-in centers	Professional external support, voluntary note taker
Central Council	Up to 10	Visitors' Council and Participants' Council	Board	Professional external support, voluntary note taker

What

Council members have several core tasks beyond attending meetings. They are responsible for informing their constituents – regular visitors of the drop-in centers – about the topics discussed in meetings. Additionally, they engage with constituents to gather input for decision-making and to help recruit potential council candidates.

The councils hold formal decision-making powers vis-à-vis the organization. These powers are based on the national *Wet medezeggenschap cliënten zorginstellingen* (Wmcz, Law on client co-determination in health care) and take two main forms: advisory rights and consent rights. Advisory rights entail that DRG must request the councils' advice on major organizational decisions that affect clients, such as long-term partnerships, substantial changes in services, major reorganizations, financial statements, and significant renovations or relocations. For these matters, DRG must

submit a written advisory request that outlines the proposed decision, its rationale and context, the expected impact on clients, accompanying measures, and a timeline for response. The organization may deviate from the councils' advice, but in that case it must consult with the relevant council and provide written reasons for doing so.

Consent rights apply to a more specific set of decisions, including policies on client participation, quality and safety, recreational activities, and the selection of staff who support the councils. For these issues, DRG cannot implement a decision without the council's explicit consent. If a council withholds consent, DRG may appeal to the *Landelijke Commissie van Vertrouwenslieden* (National Committee of Trusted Representatives, LCvV), which can override the council's refusal if it considers it unreasonable or finds compelling grounds for the decision. In addition, the councils may issue unsolicited advice on client-related matters. If DRG decides not to follow such advice, it must again consult with the council and provide a written explanation. For disputes relating to consent matters, both DRG and the councils can appeal to the LCvV for a binding decision.

The organization is responsible for informing and involving the councils at an early stage of decision-making.¹⁴ It must also facilitate and finance independent support for the councils, provide a training budget for participants, and provide accessible information to the councils. Together with the client councils, the organization is responsible for recruiting new council members (see also Appendix 6).

Why

The main reason for the organization to create its client councils was to “*optimize service provision to serve those for whom the organization works as effectively as possible*” (De Regenboog Groep 2008, 95). In other words, client councils were introduced as a structural mechanism to give (former) users of DRG's services a recognized place in formal governance, rather than leaving their involvement to ad hoc consultations.

The program embeds several incentives to stimulate and sustain participation. Council members receive financial compensation for their involvement: €6 for attending a location council meeting and €25 for meetings of the visitors' council or central council. Members with additional responsibilities, such as the president or members of the daily board, receive higher or more frequent compensation. Council members also receive reimbursement for travel and lunch costs. In addition, each

¹⁴ This model of ‘participative co-determination’ was adopted around 2010, with the goal of giving clients more opportunities to influence the decision-making process. Before this, the client councils could only voice opinions on completed organizational policy proposals and were not involved at an early stage.

council has a periodic budget to organize leisure activities for its members. Beyond these material incentives, the opportunity to influence decisions that directly affect the drop-in centers and their users can itself be a motivation to participate.

The intended benefits of the client councils operate at both individual and organizational levels. For participants, council work is expected to provide opportunities to experience influence over the services they use, thereby contributing to ownership and responsibility over the service. For DRG, the councils are meant to improve the quality and responsiveness of the drop-in centers, to generate ownership among service users, to provide opportunities for accountability, and to surface issues that might otherwise remain invisible.

6.2.3 Self-management: NOIZ

Who

NOIZ is DRG's self-managed night shelter program, attached to several of its drop-in centers. While the drop-in centers are open to everyone homeless, not all their visitors fall into the target group for the self-managed shelter. Different prerequisites apply to each of the four roles in NOIZ: caretakers, caretaker-users, participants, and users of emergency beds.¹⁵ The former two roles are the primary co-producers in the program, whereas the others can be seen as shelter users. Most NOIZ locations accommodate up to seven people: two caretakers who run the NOIZ, four users who sleep there, and one user of a short-term emergency bed. Each role targets a slightly different group, with distinct requirements.

- The target group of caretakers consists of people experiencing homelessness. The caretakers must sign a contract and have, or obtain, a first-aid and safety certificate.
- The regular users are homeless people with paid work and without complex problems. Users are expected to see their social worker at least once every two weeks. They sign a contract outlining the duration of their stay (initially three months, possibly extended by another three months) and the house rules at that location.
- The caretaker-users fall somewhere between the previous two roles. While they adhere to the same requirements as regular users, they are also responsible for keeping the locations tidy and must have a safety certificate, as caretakers do. Unlike caretakers, they do not have a supervisory role over other service users.
- The emergency beds are for people in urgent need of shelter, such as people with vulnerable health conditions sleeping on the streets.

¹⁵ As the roles of caretaker-participants and emergency bed users are rather marginal in the program, these will not be discussed extensively in the analysis.

In the program design, selection into these roles is carried out by professionals. The location manager of a drop-in center selects the caretakers of a given location. Social workers determine which clients meet the criteria for regular users, caretaker-users, and for the use of emergency beds, and refer them to Team NOIZ, which maintains a central waiting list for prospective participants and allocates places across locations.

After the first experiment proved successful, the program was scaled up to other drop-in centers over the following years. There are now NOIZ locations in seven drop-in centers and one in the organization's office space, with capacity for approximately 19 regular participants, 8 caretakers, 6 caretaker-participants, and 7 crisis beds for short-term shelter – around 40 sleeping places in total.

The frontline professionals involved in the co-production work at two departments: on one side, the managers and staff of the drop-in centers, and on the other, the professionals from the organization's social work department. The managers and staff of the drop-in centers are responsible for selecting and supporting caretakers in the self-management process.¹⁶ The social workers oversee the selection of NOIZ users and maintain contact with them throughout their stay, providing individual support with issues such as income, housing, debt, and personal problems. Furthermore, every team in the organization's social work department has one emergency bed at a specific NOIZ location at its disposal for referring users in urgent need of shelter. Team NOIZ, consisting of three employees at the social work department, manages the program. This includes managing the waiting list for prospective users, deliberating with affected parties, mediating if conflicts emerge, and being responsible for evaluating and adapting the program.

What

At night, NOIZ users enter the facility after the drop-in center's daily closing time and can use the center's cooking and shower facilities. They sleep on camp beds set up in the center. In the morning, they pack their bedding away and leave the premises before the drop-in center reopens. Regular participants and users of emergency beds primarily make use of these shelter facilities and are not expected to take on co-production tasks.

Caretakers' tasks are both practical and social (also see Appendix 7). Practically, they are responsible for maintaining the building and keeping it tidy so that it can

^{16.} Because the caretakers are the primary co-producers, this dissertation mainly focuses on the collaboration between drop-in centers and caretakers. However, I did interview NOIZ-users and representatives of the social work department.

function adequately as a drop-in center during the day. Socially, caretakers monitor and enforce the house rules when no professional staff are present. They can deny a participant access for a night in cases of rule violations. Caretaker-participants support these tasks, particularly in keeping the location clean and orderly, but they do not have a supervisory role over other users.

In terms of decision-making powers, the NOIZ model grants caretakers some discretion in the day-to-day enforcement of rules, such as deciding whether a participant may stay on a given night. Beyond this limited discretion, however, the program does not allocate broader decision-making authority to caretakers or other participants. Decisions about admissions, contract extensions, and changes to the overall program are taken by professionals. Location managers decide about the caretakers, while Team NOIZ decides about users of NOIZ.

Professional activities in relation to NOIZ focus on selection, support, and coordination. Drop-in center staff select and support caretakers in their roles and coordinate with them about the daily functioning of the shelter. Social workers assess which clients are suitable for NOIZ, monitor their progress, and provide support regarding housing, income, and other issues. Team NOIZ maintains the waiting list, manages crisis-bed placements in consultation with social work teams, mediates in case of conflicts, and periodically evaluates and adjusts the program's design and rules.

6

Why

The primary rationale for NOIZ was to create additional shelter capacity for people experiencing homelessness who are not (yet) served by the municipality's regular services, by using existing drop-in center facilities at night. By focusing on homeless people with paid work and relatively limited care needs, the program seeks to offer low-threshold, small-scale shelter that can operate with minimal professional presence on site.

At the individual level, NOIZ provides a strong material incentive for both regular participants and caretakers: free, temporary shelter in a relatively small and stable setting. This is the core incentive embedded in the program's design.

The intended benefits of NOIZ are twofold. For participants, the program aims to provide a safe place to sleep, enabling them to maintain their jobs and work toward more stable housing, thereby preventing further deterioration of their situation. For DRG, NOIZ is intended to increase shelter capacity with relatively limited professional staffing, make better use of existing facilities during the night.

6.3 Overview of the programs as designed

In short, we can identify four co-production programs within the two organizations. NuNN is fully built upon its self-management model, whereas DRG’s drop-in centers involve service users in multiple, distinct, ways, namely via visitor-volunteering, client councils, and self-management. Table 6.3 below provides an overview of the four co-production programs. On paper, these two organizations employ similar approaches to engage similar target groups in co-production. However, the key question remains: how are these intentions translated into practice? To assess the conditions for successful co-production, it is essential to examine how these programs function in real-world settings. The next chapter explores this analysis in greater depth.

Table 6.3 Overview of the co-productions as intended

	NuNN	DRG		
	<i>Self-management</i>	<i>Visitor-volunteers</i>	<i>Client council</i>	<i>Self-management (NOIZ)</i>
Who				
<i>Target group</i>	Homeless people, often with complex problems, but with some self-reliance	Homeless users of drop-in centers, often with complex problems,	Homeless users of drop-in centers, often with complex problems	Homeless people without complex problems Social work selects users
<i>Recruitment and selection mechanisms</i>	All service users can apply; the participant group decides who can participate	All can apply, but staff decide about who can participate	Visitors can apply and are recruited by client council members and organizational staff	Location managers select caretakers
<i>User / co-producer roles</i>	Guests, volunteers, managers	Visitor-volunteers	Location council, visitor’s council, central council	Users, caretaker-users, caretakers
<i>Professional roles</i>	Social workers serve as support workers for self-management	Supported and supervised by drop-in center staff	External independent advice and support; organizational staff as dialogue partner	Location managers assist caretakers in co-production; social workers provide individual support
What				
<i>Co-producer activities</i>	Rule formulation, rule enforcement, household chores, door management, meetings	Cleaning crew, cleaning, cooking, grocery shopping, bar shifts, laundry, shower list	Meetings	Household chores, door management, rule enforcement, communication with the organization

Table 6.3 Continued

	NuNN	DRG		
	<i>Self-management</i>	<i>Visitor-volunteers</i>	<i>Client council</i>	<i>Self-management (NOIZ)</i>
<i>Professional activities</i>	Support the collective process of self-management and provide individual support	Support and guidance of the process	External (voluntary) advisors support the council;	Informal support by location staff to caretakers; individual support by social workers to users
<i>Decision-making powers</i>	Participants manage participation, formulate rules, and enforce rules; professionals advise	No decision-making powers	Advisory powers and some co-decision authority	Caretakers have discretion in urgent cases, but professionals make decisions
Why				
<i>Rationale</i>	Participation in co-production creates possibilities for personal growth and empowerment, and stimulates resocialization	Participation in co-production creates shared responsibility and possibilities for personal growth and resocialization	Enable users to shape services to their needs and wishes	Additional shelter capacity for unserved people, using limited resources
<i>Embedded incentives in the program for participants</i>	Daytime shelter; transitional housing opportunities; influence; peer support; leisure activities	Financial reward; leisure activities	Financial reward; influence; leisure activities	Free night shelter
<i>Intended benefits</i>	Safe, stable shelter where shared responsibility fosters personal growth and reintegration	For participants: structure, skills, be-longing; for centers: support for daily work and a safe, welcoming atmosphere	For participants: influence and ownership; for DRG: more responsive services, accountability, and early issue detection	For participants: safe sleep, job retention, pathway to housing; for DRG: extra capacity with limited staff and efficient use of facilities

6.4 Central differences between the co-production programs as designed

Before we turn to the next chapter to explore co-production programs in practice, it is worth noting the main differences between them. When comparing the four co-production programs, four central differences in their design stand out. The first difference concerns the general organizational approach to the co-production programs, while the other three differences vary per program. The four differences are:

- Integration and segmentation
- Target group and selection barriers
- The scope of participants' powers
- The extent and nature of professional support

6.4.1 Integration and segmentation

First, a fundamental difference between the NuNN and DRG's approaches to co-production concerns integration versus segmentation. At NuNN, participation is integrated, meaning that all co-producers are expected to fulfill practical tasks (akin to the 'visitor-volunteer' model), participate in decision-making (akin to the client council), and run the shelter (partly) themselves (akin to the NOIZ-model). In contrast, at DRG, these aspects are divided into three separate programs with their own histories and functions.

6.4.2 Target group and selection barriers

Once central difference between the programs concerns the target group for co-production. The intended participants of the four co-production programs can all be considered vulnerable, as defined in Chapter 2. In programs that serve general homelessness services - NuNN's shelter and DRG's drop-in centers – the target group comprises homeless individuals, often facing issues such as substance addiction, poverty, debt, or psychiatric disorders.

However, the recruitment and selection mechanisms as outlined in the program designs create clear distinctions in the selection criteria for potential participants. At NuNN, the design allows all shelter users who express a willingness to participate to become involved, if the current participant group admits them. The low barriers to participation – reinforced by incentives such as permitting only volunteers to remain indoors during the daytime – aim for a higher participant-to-user ratio and a target group that, on paper, aspires to include individuals with more complex needs. Furthermore, at NuNN, even non-participants (guests) reside within a self-

management facility with limited professional support. In DRG's visitor-volunteer and client council programs, the participation threshold is kept low; the organization does not establish high participation requirements. Conversely, the NOIZ program imposes stricter selection barriers by explicitly excluding individuals with particularly complex problems, such as addiction or psychiatric disorders. This applies to both the active co-producing caretakers and the users of NOIZ, with exceptions only for short-term users of emergency beds.

In summary, based on their designed structures, there are significant differences in both the complexity of the target groups and the selection barriers imposed. These differences are central to understanding the intended functioning of the programs and the anticipated challenges in engaging participants.

6.4.3 The scope of participants' powers

Another central difference concerns the scope of participants' powers. Participants' powers can take three forms:

- *Governance*: the power to make collective decisions about the co-production and general services
- *Peer discretion*: the leeway in applying rules and providing services to fellow participants and/or service users
- *Peer governance*: the power to make collective decisions about the provision of sanctions and benefits to individual fellow participants and/or service users

The latter two of these forms are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

At NuNN, participants hold the primary decision-making powers in the co-production as designed. While professional staff are present in an advisory capacity, the program ultimately lets participants decide by majority vote. Correspondingly, they have governance power to formulate general rules. They also have the power to apply these rules to specific users – both in on-the-spot cases (peer discretion) and through collective decision-making (peer governance). Service users have some discretion in fulfilling their roles and applying the rules. Thereby, the participant group is responsible for managing participation by both co-producers and service users. NuNN provides high levels of decision-making power and discretion to its participants. The scope of their decisions and actions, moreover, is broad: affecting not only themselves, but also other co-producers, service users, professionals, and potentially the organization.

DRG's visitor-volunteers program is not designed to provide participants with powers. The client council is the program that mainly focuses on providing influence for its participants. The emphasis here is on governance: councils provide advice and co-decide on organizational policies that are relevant for specific locations, all drop-in centers, or the entire organization. In contrast to NuNN, participants have veto power at most. Internally, the councils also have limited peer governance powers. For instance, councils can elect their president and the members who represent the council at higher levels.

DRG's NOIZ is not focused on providing decision-making opportunities for its caretakers and users either. They have no formal routes for influencing the program in general. However, the caretakers do have *peer discretion*. In the absence of professionals, caretakers are responsible for discretionary actions and decisions in individual cases concerning the users of NOIZ.

6.4.4 The extent and nature of professional support

A final central characteristic concerns the extent and nature of professional support, meaning both how much support is present and whether it is consultative or also directive and enforcement-oriented (see Table 6.4). At NuNN, there are usually two to three professionals on-site during office hours on weekdays. However, in the evenings, at night, and on weekends, no professional staff are present. This results in relatively little professional support. In the program design, the nature of support is purely consultative: social workers provide guidance and advice, but ultimate authority lies with the participant group.

At DRG, both the extent and the type of professional support vary by program. In the visitor-volunteer program, participants handle practical tasks while approximately four professional staff members are present at any given time to provide hands-on support. Here, professional support includes both consultative guidance and directive elements when needed.

In contrast, for the client council, organizational staff primarily serve as the council's speaking partner. In this program, professional support – facilitated by volunteers at the location councils – is constantly available in a consultative role; professionals guide and support the process, while the councils retain ultimate decision-making authority.

Finally, in the NOIZ program, professional support is limited but directive. While the caretakers have some autonomy and discretion when professionals are absent, the professionals remain ultimately responsible and can step in with corrective measures when required.

Table 6.4 Extent and nature of professional support as designed

Professional support	Continuous presence	Limited presence
Advisory	CC	NuNN
Directive	Visitor-Volunteers	NOIZ

6.4.5 Overview

All of the discussed central differences between the co-production programs as designed are summarized in Table 6.5 below. The table highlights the different approaches taken by each co-production program, in terms of target group, nature and scope of participants' powers, and the extent and nature of professional support.

Table 6.5. Central program characteristics

	NuNN	DRG		
	Self-management	Visitor-volunteers	Client council	Self-management
<i>Target group</i>	Homeless people with complex problems	Homeless people with complex problems	Homeless people with complex problems	Homeless people without complex problems
<i>Nature and scope of participants' powers</i>				
Governance	Full decision-making authority in the shelter	No decision-making powers	Co-decision and advisory powers on organizational policies	No decision-making powers
Peer discretion	Discretion on how to apply the rules	No discretion	No discretion	Discretion on how to apply the rules to users
Peer governance	Decisions on individual service users and co-producers, and applying general rules	N/A	Decisions on internal council matters	N/A
<i>Extent and nature of professional support</i>	Limited and advisory	Continuous and directive	Continuous and advisory	Limited and directive

Still, these differences only concern the programs as intended – not their actual implementation. Therefore, in the next chapter, we will explore what these program designs amount to in the day-to-day practice of service provision.



Chapter 7.

Co-production in practice

Introduction

The previous chapter provided insight into the co-production programs as intended. But as we explored in Chapter 2, significant differences may exist between stated intentions and practice. This risk is believed to be even greater in co-production with vulnerable groups (Park, 2020; Broadhurst, 2023). This implies that we cannot simply assume the intentions of the co-production structures correspond to the practice of service provision. Therefore, this chapter asks: *How are co-production programs implemented in practice?*

To answer this question, I will use the analytical framework sketched in Chapter 3, provided in Table 7.1 below. Using observations, interviews, and focus groups, this chapter will analyze how the programs discussed previously are implemented in practice.

Table 7.1 Co-production in practice

(Sub)dimension	Co-production in practice
Co-producers	Actual participants
Selection and recruitment	Actual use of selection and recruitment mechanisms
Participant roles	Roles of participants
Professional roles	Roles of professionals
Co-producer activities	Actual tasks and responsibilities
Decision-making powers	Empirical distribution of decision-making powers
Professional activities	Tasks performed by staff
Rationale of the program initiators	Reasons invoked by service-providing staff
Embedded incentives	Which incentives participants experience as salient
Benefits	Reported benefits in practice

The end of this chapter summarizes the differences between the programs’ intentions and implementation. This chapter thereby takes a necessary intermediary step before we delve into the enabling conditions for co-production.

7.1 NuNN

7.1.1 Self-management

Who

As explored in the previous chapter, NuNN's target group consists of homeless people with complex problems, but not to the extent that they require continuous supervision or care. This is reflected in the shelter's actual user group. Many users of the shelter have debt issues and use alcohol or drugs (which is allowed in the shelter); some suffer from mental disorders (e.g., PTSD, aggression problems, or psychotic issues) or have a history of incarceration. Some shelter users have jobs, but most receive social assistance benefits. As a social worker notes: *"I don't think we have many people who are just homeless here; in that case, this probably isn't the place for you, and you wouldn't feel comfortable here."* (F3).

The participant group decides who is allowed to stay at the shelter. Prospective guests or people who have come to the shelter in the past week usually introduce themselves to the group at the residents' meeting. Usually, the group and social workers ask a few questions to aspiring guests, relating to their personal background, possible drug or alcohol use, and the reason why people became homeless. The point is to determine whether the shelter would be a suitable fit for the person. Incidentally, during these occasions, it becomes clear that a person is not a good match for the shelter. Some prospective guests immediately show signs of psychiatric disorders or that they cannot function well in a group. As a NuNN participant states: *"In such cases, there's just a consensus, and you think: no. Such decisions are often rather unanimous."* (CP2).

Still, if the shelter has vacant beds, people are generally admitted. Ultimately, the participant group determines who is welcome, but since the municipality is the primary funder, it expects a high occupancy rate. Social workers are mindful of these expectations and help guide the group's decision-making accordingly. This is reflected in the shelter's occupancy rate. In 2022, this was 78%. However, this was partly due to COVID-19 measures. In 2019, for instance, the occupancy rate was about 95%. There is, however, variation in the degree to which a particular group is open to newcomers. There was a period of multiple months when the participants' group seemed to be more restrictive about who they let reside in the shelter, as a street-level worker from the organization that decides who has access to municipal shelter services in the region generally states: *"In the first half of this year, far fewer people were admitted to NuNN. Normally, we would see close to 60 new admissions over six months, totaling around 120 over a full year, but this year we had only 30 in the first half."* (R2). Therefore, it

seems that there can be significant differences between various participant-group constellations in how they use their powers to accept or reject applying service users.¹⁷

Being admitted to the shelter is one thing, fitting in well is another. While the night shelter is in principle accessible to anyone homeless in the region, in practice, specific additional characteristics determine whether service users are a good fit for this self-managed shelter. For a more extended stay, it is essential that individuals can take care of themselves to some extent, meaning they can adhere to house rules regarding safety and hygiene. For example, people with severe mental health issues may not always be able to meet these hygiene standards. Additionally, it is essential that people can work in a group and follow the volunteers' instructions. Social workers note that some individuals accept hierarchical authority only from professionals or security guards, not from their peers, which makes functioning in a self-managed setting difficult. Whether someone is suitable to stay in a self-managed setting, therefore, is often only clear after a period of time, as a participant notes: *"Yes, we've experienced quite often that people came in who turned out not to be capable of taking care of themselves. Then we decide as a group: maybe it would be better if they went somewhere with more supervision. Here, it's self-management; we help each other, but everyone has their own problems. If your problems burden others too much, then this is not the place for you."* (CP9).

In terms of actively participating in self-management, in practice, all guests can sign up to be 'guest of the week' after using the shelter for a week. Usually, there is room for one or two of these try-out volunteers each week. In general, current groups tend to set a few requirements for potential volunteers. They must be (at least somewhat) able to communicate in Dutch or English, meet some physical requirements for running shifts, and not have exhibited *too* disruptive behavior in the shelter as a guest. During fieldwork, nearly everyone who asked has become a volunteer. The need to fill the upcoming week's schedule strongly motivates the participant group to recruit new participants; otherwise, they would have to cover additional shifts themselves.

Formally, there are no differences in role among the professional support staff, apart from the distinction between staff members and interns. Several respondents, however, point out that informal differences do exist. For example, the social worker who has worked at NuNN the longest is quickly regarded as a *de facto* supervisor, even though there are no formal hierarchical distinctions within the team.

¹⁷. This happened after the primary period of fieldwork. Therefore, this observation is based on interviews and informal conversations, but it was not observed in the residents' meetings.

What

Participants are expected to run three eight-hour shifts per week. The shifts are run in pairs. There is some variation in the core tasks on each shift: in the morning, the main task is to clean and ensure that all guests leave the shelter by 10. The day shift primarily involves grocery shopping and cooking. The evening shift mainly focuses on cleaning and door management. The night shift, in turn, is principally focused on maintaining safety and order in the shelter.

Substantial variation may occur in participants' capacity or willingness to carry out their tasks. For instance, a common complaint at residents' meetings is that some participants treat the night shifts as sleep shifts. Moreover, especially when the dinner meal is not proper, this can lead to considerable frustration. At the same time, participants also have a lot of understanding and willingness to take over each other's tasks, as one participant states: *"Sometimes people don't fulfill their tasks, and someone else from the group does it. I sometimes slept through my shift, and people said: let him sleep."* (CP5).

In practice, as well as designed, the participant group's decision-making powers go far and involve formulating, applying, and enforcing house rules in the shelter. Rules can be enforced during shifts, for example, by telling guests to leave the shelter during the daytime. It can also happen during the meeting. For instance, participants can collectively decide on a warning or sanction when a volunteer has not been behaving as required during shifts or is behind on his monthly payments to the shelter, as well as decide who will be promoted to manager. This makes this co-production essentially political, as it entails collective decision-making about distributive questions. This also highlights that co-producers' decisions affect not only themselves, but also other service users who themselves are in vulnerable situations. This is what we dubbed *peer governance* in the previous chapter. Box 7.1 provides an example of such a decision.

Box 7.1 It's an exit**It's an exit**

Alex, who used to be a manager but was sanctioned last week to return to the shelter as a task volunteer because he made unfounded accusations against a social worker of sleeping with shelter residents, was caught stealing in a nearby supermarket while doing groceries during his volunteer shift. Participants and social workers discuss this in the residents' meeting.

Noah addresses Alex: "I'll be very honest. Next time, as far as I'm concerned, it's just an exit. The office [the social workers] is working on our behalf, and you should show them respect. Besides, I don't think it's okay when members of our group steal.... That can't happen too often, you know."

Alex defends himself: 'Honestly, I never learned to budget as a kid. I'd always fill up my shopping cart, and then I'd have no idea.'

Emily glances around the room with a sceptical expression, her eyes wide with disbelief, yet she remains silent.

Olivia chimes in: 'And it's a very clear rule, you know. Stealing, definitely not okay – but especially not here in the vicinity of NuNN.'

Luke adds, half-jokingly: 'If you want to steal, you should go to Dukenburg' – referring to a neighbourhood far from the city centre.

Noah continues: 'You know, as far as I'm concerned, it's already an exit. You've already been demoted, and you haven't even returned to the NuNN yet, and you're already pulling this. Do we really need that? So, I honestly say, I vote that he's out. But, well, more people need to vote, but I just consider this an exit. You can't tolerate this kind of discrimination [sic] against the office or something.'

James supports him: 'That just can't happen.'

A heated discussion ensues. The social workers then gather everyone's opinions, and in the end, all participants vote to have Alex leave the shelter.

Emily, Olivia, and Luke are social workers; the others are co-producers

While the decisions are formally taken at the weekly residents' meeting, such decisions are often already discussed among residents during the week. One participant notes that: "I think that most things are already discussed among ourselves, solving problems and conflicts and whatnot" (CP5). This also affects participants' perceptions of the meetings. While three respondents clearly note that this is the place where the decisions are made, another co-producer notes that: "Honestly, I think those meetings are a joke. It's a theater, a puppet show. Usually, that stuff is already discussed between us during the week."

(...) *Who gets to go to a manager apartment, for instance, or if someone gets banned from the shelter*" (CP4). While the social workers are aware of this, they stress that – one way or another – the most important thing is that the participants are still in charge of decisions, as one notes: *"They always see it themselves like this, because a lot of what is discussed has already been decided by them beforehand. And because of that, they may see it as some puppet show – or that it's just for us [social workers] or something. But in the end, they make those decisions – it's their responsibility"* (F9).

Professional activities in practice are diverse. In a sense, they operate as frontline workers in any regular shelter facility would: they handle office affairs, they maintain contact with stakeholders in the service environment, such as neighbors, police, and other frontline organizations, and they maintain individual client contact. The distinction, however, is that another central component of their work is aimed at facilitating the participant group in running the shelter and making collective decisions. They facilitate the weekly residents' meetings, guide decision-making, and help the group communicate and apply decisions. In practice, the social workers also occasionally put limits on participants' decision-making capacities. Social workers often state safety regulations or municipal policy decisions that the shelter must adhere to during meetings as boundaries for the group's decision-making process. Furthermore, social workers may argue that specific actions are not possible due to safety considerations, even if this is not explicitly stated in the regulations. For example, at one point, the participant group wished for a 'buzzer' upstairs so they could open the front door without having to walk downstairs. The social workers, however, stated that this would create a safety concern. As a social worker addresses the participant group in a meeting, about this request: *"We did not think this was a good idea from a safety perspective. Because in the end, there will be people who use this for people that you do not know. And unlike other shelters, we don't have security staff – so we think this would be unwise."* (F6). This shows that, while self-management places decision-making authority in the participants' hands, the social workers do set its limits.

Why

As outlined in the previous chapter, NuNN was founded with two main objectives: to provide a shelter that responded to the needs and wishes of homeless people, and to empower them in the service process to support their reintegration into society. These reasons are also invoked by professionals. As one social worker notes, NuNN purposively takes a different approach than regular service providers:

Regular services are often protocolled and aimed at getting people as soon as possible out of the shelter. To push people through that funnel as quickly

as possible, there is a lot of pressure placed on the individuals residing there at that moment. When you arrive, the following week, you will already have a conversation about what you've done to move on from there. But people who end up in shelters – you can assume they have become socially and societally isolated. They don't see their own possibilities for solving their problems at that moment and may not have a clear idea of what they need. In my opinion, you need to allow space for that. (F1)

These rationales are generally echoed by others. Another social worker, for instance, notes that: *“For us, the most important thing is to offer people a warm, welcoming place, where they can also once again be of meaning to others, regain some self-worth, and use that as a stepping stone back into society”* (F6). This suggests that the stated rationale is reflected in practice.

Co-producers' stated motivations to participate reflect a mix of incentives. External motives are often the first trigger: participants are allowed to stay inside the shelter during the day, while regular guests must leave – a particularly appealing prospect in winter. Moreover, they can progress to one of the shelter's manager apartments and, eventually, to social housing – a powerful motivator in a city where the waiting time for a social home averages more than twenty years (Reith 2023).

Still, these practical motives rarely stand alone. Many participants emphasized that they enjoy doing something useful, being active, and connecting with others. As one co-producer explained, he hesitated to join until he felt the group had matured: *“At first, I held off – that group was, well, a bit less... you know. But when one decent guy stepped up, I thought, ‘okay, now they’re starting to listen to a reasonable voice; now I can join too’”* (CP3). A social worker (F4) observed that many people initially join for pragmatic reasons, such as having a warm place to stay during the day, but then discover unexpected personal rewards. *“At first, it’s just about being allowed inside,”* she said, *“but once they start helping others, they realize, ‘hey, I do matter, I am important.’”* She noted that for people who have *“not been seen for years,”* this recognition can be transformative in helping them regain confidence, purpose, and self-care. As one participant summed it up in his own words: *“Yeah, it was fucking cold outside, so it’s nice to be able to stay indoors. But it wasn’t just that. I don’t have enough registration years here to get social housing, and renting privately is a nightmare. Over time, though, I realized that it’s actually a pretty great thing they’ve set up. This whole concept of self-management, it’s a cool idea”* (CP4). In short, participation often begins with external incentives but develops into something more profound: an experience of usefulness, belonging, and group bonding.

In terms of experienced benefits, most interviewed participants report appreciating the freedom offered within the shelter, especially compared to other service providers (CP2, CP3, CP4, CP5, CP6, CP7, CP9). These respondents report experiencing being allowed to chart their own course and having the space to be left alone for a while. The program seeks to foster a sense of responsibility and socialization among participants by making them feel a sense of ownership of the shelter. And most responding participants do experience this: *“Explaining self-management? That’s easy: we decide together if things get done. And as a group, we discuss stuff (...) You just really feel that you have some control and some personal responsibility”* (CP9). As stated, this control relates to day-to-day affairs and the formulation, application, and enforcement of shelter rules. Running shifts also helps with this. Respondents voiced that experiencing ownership and responsibility can lead to personal growth (CP2; CP5; CP6; CP9): *“Sometimes, yes, you’ve messed up your life so much that, well, some people even let go of their personal care. And [here] you have to cook for others, when you have the evening shift, you have to clean everything, and so on. And if you didn’t do that at home before, well, now you have to do it anyway. Then you build some routine.”* (CP2) Another co-producer clearly states that mutual support can foster personal growth. Another respondent states that living in a group also confronts you with your own (past) behavior and that peers can serve as a mirror: *“Look, I’ve had my fair share of addiction problems and I’ve done some things here too. But now I don’t do that anymore, and it works. It’s because of that mirror. And yes, I find certain behavior very annoying and quite painful to see”* (CP2).

In other words, self-management may yield positive outcomes for some, but negative ones for others. A frontline worker (R4) close to the organization notes that many residents have already been through other programs. They are *“tired of social workers”* or *“stubborn in their own way; sometimes, in a healthy, sometimes in a less healthy sense.”* These participants often say that they like the program precisely because *“there’s less interference and here I have to do it myself.”* Some of them are *“simply done with being managed,”* and it is valuable that *“there’s a place like this where you can start again”* (R4). However, as mentioned, this model may not work equally well for everyone. Although no quantitative data is available, several staff members and partners reported that, for those who benefit, NuNN tends to support more sustainable exits from homelessness, suggesting that while the program does not fit all, it can be profoundly effective for some.

There are also some unintended benefits to self-management. Because the program relies so intensely on participants’ own input, there is no need for social workers or security staff to be present around the clock, as is common in regular shelters. As one frontline worker remarked, *“We’re the cheapest shelter in the Netherlands; the municipality would be crazy to put an end to this”* (F9; also see Tuynman and Huber 2014, 16).

7.2 DRG

7.2.1 Visitor-Volunteers

Who

The organization estimates that, out of its yearly total of 5,000 unique service users, about 120 serve as visitor-volunteers each month. While the threshold to become a visitor-volunteer is relatively low, not all service users are ready or able to take on the role. Some people struggle with uncontrolled drug use, aggression, or psychotic disorders that make participation difficult. At the same time, there are no formal requirements besides being a registered visitor of the drop-in centers. As one staff member explained, *“Visitor-volunteers don’t need to have a job or a contract to work for us. They don’t have to be fully self-sufficient either. We have volunteers who we know drink or smoke weed, or sometimes do something else. But as long as they’re dependable and not intoxicated during work, it is fine”* (FM2). Even so, these demands mean that a substantial part of the target group is either not eligible or not interested in becoming a visitor-volunteer. As another staff member explained, many of the centers’ visitors sleep outside, almost all are homeless, some use drugs, and a few face severe mental disorders. This is visible at the drop-in center itself: one person stares fixatedly at a marble in his hand; another sometimes swings his arms uncontrollably – not out of aggression but to fend off syringes he hallucinates flying toward him, a staff member explains (observation June 2023).

Usually, the recruitment process happens organically, either because people actively state that they want to participate, or because employees suspect that service users could gain something from participating. As a drop-in center manager states:

When we conduct an intake with new visitors, we always ask them, “Do you enjoy doing something to help out?” Usually, they want to take some time to settle in first, which is perfectly fine, and they often revisit the idea later. We also take the initiative ourselves. For example, if we notice someone sitting at a table with their cup of coffee for three weeks straight, we might say, “Hey, would you enjoy helping us out with something?” If all the regular tasks are already assigned – we do have a set schedule, after all – and someone comes to us saying, “I’d really like to do something,” we’ll come up with something for them. (...) We always find a way to include them. (FM1).

Moreover, employees are especially attentive to service users who may have much to gain from participating, as a location manager states: *“Take someone who has just come out of a clinic, or maybe just out of a toxic relationship. In those situations, we’re not necessarily trying to keep them here on purpose, but we know that staying inside and having some structure is what’s best for them at that moment. So, we come up with something for them to do every day.”* (FM1). Although visitor-volunteers can apply on their own, they are often motivated and actively recruited by employees to participate. Correspondingly, most interviewed visitor-volunteers note that employees asked them to join as visitor-volunteers.

In practice, the division of roles largely corresponds to the program design. Paid staff and location managers are present during opening hours, coordinate the daily work in the center, and carry final responsibility for the safety and atmosphere in and around the facility, while also acting as the primary facilitators of the visitor-volunteers who co-produce these services.

What

Visitor-volunteers’ activities involve a range of practical tasks related to the day-to-day operations of the drop-in center. This involves cooking, grocery shopping, collecting food donations, running a bar shift, cleaning, managing the waiting list for the showers that visitors may use, managing the laundry room, or managing the clothing counter where people can pick up or swap clothes. Furthermore, some drop-in centers provide the opportunity to be part of a clean-up crew that picks up litter in the neighborhood around the drop-in center a few times per week. Visitor-volunteers usually start with the simplest tasks with little responsibility, such as being part of the cleanup crew. Gradually, visitor-volunteers may be given tasks that involve greater responsibility, for instance, communicating with other visitors or with organizational resources. As a location manager states: *“I don’t give every visitor-volunteer the bank card, nor do I send them out with 300 euros in cash. But yes, there are some visitor-volunteers who get that responsibility”* (FM3).

The visitor-volunteer program does not explicitly facilitate influence for participants, but in practice, some tasks do involve limited (peer) discretion. For example, visitor-volunteers can oversee managing the waiting list for the shower facilities most drop-in centers have, the washing machine, and the entry desk that registers who comes in and who cannot come in. The degree of discretion provided to visitor-volunteers depends on how much is entrusted to them by the drop-in center staff.

A core task of the professionals working in the drop-in centers is to manage and facilitate the visitor-volunteers who are present at that moment. A person-centered approach is necessary here, as some visitor-volunteers have been active in the organization for decades, whereas others are only just starting, as an employee notes:

It's a combination of addressing people directly when they show behavior you don't want to see and creating a space for open dialogue. (...) The level of autonomy we can expect varies. With certain visitors, I can even ask them for advice; with others, though, it's a constant process of guiding them through each step, and that's fine – it's just how it works. Everyone needs something different, and that's okay. (F10).

Why

The organizational rationale for co-production in practice appears to align with its intentions. Frontline drop-in center employees mirror the organizational director's initial remarks in 2008, when the organization shifted toward greater use of visitor-volunteers. As a drop-in center staff member notes: *"We just really hope that our visitors participate; I believe it makes people feel more responsible for the drop-in center"* (F10). A frontline worker at another drop-in center notes that:

It gives people the chance to be part of a team, to do something meaningful. It provides structure to their day. It's a way for them to slowly reintegrate into mainstream society and eventually find a regular job. They learn to arrive on time, to stick to commitments, and to communicate when they can't show up or are running late. Of course, we also know that some people are here just to earn a few extra euros. They might never transition to a regular job. And that's okay too. (FM1).

The main incentive the organization provides for people to participate as visitor-volunteers is a small reimbursement of 7 euros per 4-hour shift. As a location council member and visitor-volunteer once noted in a council meeting on recruiting people for the clean-up crew: *"We need to emphasize that they get six¹⁸ euros! Money motivates everyone!"*

Motivating as it may be, respondents mainly cite gaining responsibility, rhythm, and personal growth as reasons for participating. As one participant notes, especially about the beginning: *"It gave me some structure to my life. I didn't drink anymore during*

¹⁸. The reimbursement was adjusted to €7 during the fieldwork period.

the daytime because I was expected to work here. It kind of got me back into the normal world.” (CP22). Two others note that they do not like sitting still and want to feel useful. Finally, the desire to help others in similar positions can also serve as a motivator:

My main motivation for doing this is my deep belief in the value of being there for someone during difficult times, especially when they are homeless. I believe it's crucial to be someone they can rely on – someone who gives them the sense that, no matter what, they have someone in their corner. Even though I'm in the same situation myself, that hasn't stopped me. In fact, it has made me stronger and more resilient. Because of this, I've also been able to secure my own housing more quickly. The process itself has helped me move forward faster. (CP23).

In summary, this suggests that the reasons for organizing co-production that are emphasized by the organization – fostering responsibility, providing daily structure, and supporting gradual reintegration – are broadly echoed in how both staff and visitor-volunteers describe their motivations and experienced benefits. Financial incentives play a role as an initial trigger, but are typically accompanied by desires for usefulness, routine, and mutual support.

7

7.2.2 Client Council

Who

The client council of DRG operates across multiple drop-in centers in the city. In theory, up to 80 unique members could be active across the location councils. In practice, however, the total number fluctuates between roughly 15 and 30 members. Some drop-in centers struggle to maintain the minimum of four council members, and several individuals serve on multiple councils. Fluctuations occur both across time and between centers. As the director notes: *“At some locations it's much easier than others. If people don't speak the language, or come from cultures where democracy isn't a given, it's harder”* (M4). Eight of the ten interviewed members were in their second or third term, and four served on multiple location councils. This indicates that a relatively small, stable core group carries much of the participation.

The client council of DRG is targeted at (formerly) homeless people who visit the organization's drop-in centers around the city. While the organization primarily aims to involve current homeless visitors to the drop-in center, not all visitors are equally represented in the councils. Multiple respondents see involving women and

people who do not speak Dutch or English as a challenge (EA1; FM1; CP28). Moreover, especially the visitors who sleep rough and have no access to a night shelter in the city – a substantial part of the drop-in centers' target group – are challenging to recruit: *"It's difficult to get homeless visitors – those who are truly sleeping rough – into the council. You can imagine why. Keeping up with a schedule, and then, when the moment of truth comes, staying focused – well, try keeping your concentration after spending the whole night walking the streets. So, it's completely understandable. It's tough"* (FM6).

Also, councils with more homeless people are not always necessarily representative, as a location manager notes about her drop-in center's location council: *"They're people who are no longer struggling with homelessness. I mean, they are homeless, but they've made peace with it. They don't really want things to be any different. So they're not really representative of the broader group of visitors. And honestly, I'm not sure if it's even possible for someone who's still fighting to get back on their feet to take that kind of detached, overarching perspective."* (FM3).

Most of the participants active in the councils have already visited the drop-in centers for a longer period and are also active as visitor-volunteers. Usually, their problems have stabilized somewhat. Most of them have acquired longer-term shelter or their own housing. Still, most of the members in the client councils do have a history of homelessness, and some are currently homeless. A few members are unsheltered homeless and sleep in a tent in a park. Especially the drop-in centers that specifically focus on services for non-Dutch EU citizens, who have more trouble accessing municipal night shelter services, have some unsheltered homeless people in their council. Some members have (a history of) substance abuse problems. Others are undocumented immigrants. Some have psychosocial problems. Therefore, the participants in practice share many characteristics with the intended target group, aside from the fact that the rough sleepers, non-Dutch and non-English speaking homeless, and women are underrepresented. If they want to, though, all visitors can apply to join a location council.

In terms of roles, co-producers' positions in practice largely mirror the formal council structure. Each location council elects a president and delegates up to two members to the visitors' council; both the visitors' council and the central council have an elected president as well. These higher-level councils also elect a board responsible for preparing the monthly meetings. In practice, however, much of this preparatory work is carried out by the independent external facilitators who support the councils.

Professional roles also correspond broadly to the program design: location managers serve as discussion partners at the local level, and external advisors and note-

takers support the visitors' council and central council. At the same time, practical constraints mean that these roles are not always cleanly separated. Some location councils struggle to recruit enough volunteers, leading volunteers at times to serve simultaneously as both minute-taker and advisor.

What

The program intends the council members' core tasks to attend meetings, informing and representing their constituents, and recruit potential candidates. While the meetings' attendance is relatively high, there is much variation in how participants approach their role. One member hardly visits the drop-in centers outside of the meetings and rarely speaks to its visitors, whereas others take the tasks of representing the visitors of drop-in centers very seriously:

You really need to be present. Not every single day, but maybe once a week. You stop by, you chat, especially with familiar faces, the visitor-volunteers. You observe. That's how I've learned a lot – by observing. Watching how things operate. Seeing how staff members solve problems. When an issue arises, you can observe and see how it's resolved. A conflict with the visitors, things like that. (CP28)

7

Some members of location councils often interpret their roles more broadly than outlined on paper, taking on additional tasks and responsibilities. This highlights the overlap between the co-production programs in practice. As one location manager explains: *"We now have a council that actually takes initiative. (...) They head out into the city, looking for potential donors. And they take their responsibilities seriously"* (FM1). Another example is a location council at a drop-in center that successfully advocated for the creation of a cleaning crew program (which the center did not previously have) and then actively recruited participants from within the drop-in center to join the crew. At the same time, other minor tasks are often not conducted by most participants, such as reading the minutes of the previous meetings, the agenda of the upcoming meetings, and the supplementary materials accompanying them.

In terms of decision-making powers, the cooperation agreement between the client council and the organization stipulates that DRG must inform and involve the councils at an early stage of decision-making. Usually, the central council and the visitors' council are involved early in organizational processes. At the location council level, however, practice varies. This depends mainly on the specific relationship between the location council and the location manager, the competence and attitude of a council, and the location manager's views on involving the council in decisions.

It can also vary by topic. For instance, in 2021, the councils reported that they were only informed at the very last moment during recruitment procedures for new location managers, disregarding their potential advisory role. During the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in 2020, the crisis took precedence over participatory decision-making. The director (the central council's speaking partner) was perceived as difficult to reach, leaving other council members and their constituents feeling unheard. Efforts to use videoconferencing as an alternative to in-person meetings proved unsuitable for the target group. Additionally, there were periods when council members with temporary housing were barred from accessing drop-in centers, which further hampered their ability to perform their tasks.

At the same time, many decision-making processes reflect the intentions described on paper. With incidental exceptions, councils convene monthly. Councils provide solicited and unsolicited advice to the drop-in centers or the organization, and DRG tends to request advice or consent where this is formally required. Councils have, for instance, influenced policies on food, visitor suspension, opening hours, and renovation plans. However, there is one drop-in center where this is not the case. The collaboration between the location council and the location manager was so disappointing that the drop-in center organized an alternative form of informal input for drop-in center users through a monthly informal visitors' meeting. According to respondents, this primarily reflected frustration about poor collaboration and a perceived lack of representativeness of the location council.

Generally, though, the decision-making processes reflect the ways it is intended. With incidental exceptions, councils convene monthly. Councils provide solicited or unsolicited advice to the drop-in centers or locations, and the organization tends to ask the councils for advice or consent where this is required. For instance, councils have influenced drop-in centers' policies on food, visitor suspension policy, opening hours, and renovation plans (see Box 7.2 below).

Professional activities broadly correspond to the program design but are shaped by practical constraints. There are several collaborative tasks between external advisors, minute-takers, location managers, and council members. Recruitment of new members is one example. As most location councils struggle to find suitable candidates, drop-in center staff, council members, and supporting advisors and minute-takers jointly approach potential candidates. Most location councils have made posters, and many organize a few activities each year, such as pizza parties, to inform service users about the council and attract new members. External supporters and organizational staff also see it as a shared task to enhance the responsiveness

of the councils, stimulating council members to actively seek the opinions of daily visitors, for example, through suggestion boxes or surveys on specific topics (as in the sustainability case).

Box 7.2 Council involvement in practice

Council involvement in practice: Sustainability and food

To support its green ambitions in the coming years, the DRG started a working group among its employees to assess its environmental impact. The group determined that a significant portion of the organization's emissions stems from the meat in the meals served daily in its 10 drop-in centers – approximately 50 to 100 meals per location per day. Based on these findings, the organization wanted to increase the frequency of vegetarian meals.

Under the organization's participation framework, this is a topic requiring client council approval. To address the proposal, the organization hosted a strategy day ('heidag'), attended by members of the working group, the general drop-in centers manager, all location managers, fourteen members of the visitors' council, and its professional advisor. In preparation, each location council conducted a survey among its shelter users, gathering 228 responses in total. Results showed that 62% of respondents supported having one set day per week where only vegetarian meals are served; 33% were in favor of serving vegetarian meals every day.

During the strategy day, participants brainstormed and deliberated on how to make meal provision more sustainable. After the strategy day, the visitors' council approved the proposed plan to collaborate on promoting sustainable food practices, including organizing vegetarian cooking workshops for the chefs of drop-in centers. Furthermore, the parties agreed that each location council would work with its drop-in center manager to determine how a single vegetarian-only day per week would be implemented at their shelter.

The primary organizational tasks in facilitating the client councils are providing budget, hiring external independent support for the higher-level councils, and recruiting volunteers for the location councils to support them. The organization also finances external training for the volunteers and for the council members, for instance about how to run effective meetings.

In practice, it can be difficult to find qualified volunteers to take notes of the meetings and/or advise the council. The minute-takers and/or professional advisors have

an especially important role, as the first part of the council meetings is discussed without representatives of the drop-in center or organization present. Especially at a local level, however, it is sometimes difficult to find qualified minute-takers and/or advisors. While these roles are distinct on paper, and the visitor's council has both a voluntary minute-taker and a professional advisor, many local councils only have a voluntary minute-taker. However, as one of these volunteers states:

In these settings, it's simply not the case that you can just sit and take minutes (...). It really can get quite chaotic at times (...), which means you'll automatically end up taking on a role in managing the atmosphere. Or you'd have to be completely tone-deaf to just sit there typing away. Once, I had a situation where someone jumped up and started threatening another person. In moments like that, you must step in. So, it's just not realistic for a minute-taker to solely focus on taking minutes. (EA4)

Support to council members is thus formally meant to be provided by voluntary and professional advisors, accompanied by minute-takers, but in practice, location managers at the location level are often more intensively involved. This may entail proactively sending reminders about meeting dates and decisions, and actively supporting the council's functioning. In contrast, the visitors' council and central councils are primarily supported by professional advisors; at these levels, the activities of organizational representatives mainly involve acting as constructive dialogue partners by consistently showing up, coming prepared, and discussing matters patiently and respectfully.

Why

Relating to the organizational rationale for creating a client council, the organizational director, who was active at the time of creating the council structure in the early 2000s, states that the rationale for creating the client councils was based on a combination of normative and instrumental considerations:

The main reason was simply this: we stand for equality; we stand for inclusion. A drop-in center isn't necessarily about providing formal care, but rather a form of accessible support. And you also want to avoid creating an 'us versus them' dynamic. Aggression was a significant issue back then. In the drop-in centers and the drug consumption rooms, there were frequent suspensions and instances of aggression. At that time, you could also see that the professionals and visitors were increasingly at

odds with each other. So the focus became: how can we approach this more collaboratively? How can we make shared responsibility a part of the solution? (M4)

The organization continues to stand by this rationale. While organizing user participation involves a substantial financial investment – totaling approximately €100,000 per year – the director asserts that it helps foster a sense of shared responsibility, ensures the organization receives structured feedback from its users, and obliges the organization to account for its decisions and actions. Frontline staff broadly endorse these aims, but are also acutely aware of the practical challenges of realizing them in everyday practice. As one drop-in center staff member explains: *“It’s always a bit of a search: approaching people and asking, ‘Would you be interested in doing this?’ I do think the council is a good reflection right now – but that can change quickly. We once had someone who wanted to sit on our location council mainly because there’s a financial allowance, but he hardly ever came to the drop-in center. How can you represent the visitors if you’re never actually here? And then there are others who are here every day, but have no desire at all to be on the council”* (F11).

For council members, there is generally a mix of reasons why they became involved and stay involved. Some members tell how they became involved because a location manager or a council member asked them to join the location council. *“I was here five days a week for quite a while. So, I saw a lot. I noticed things that could or couldn’t be improved, things people get upset about, or challenges they face. So she [the location manager] said, ‘Isn’t this something for you? You have an insider’s perspective.’”* (CP22).

Others emphasize that they want to have a say in what they do and do not appreciate about the drop-in centers. The financial incentives can also play a role. Council members receive about €6 for each attended location council meeting and €25 for participating in a visitors’ council or central council meeting. Some members perceive others to be primarily motivated by this allowance: *“Some people only do it for the financial reward. They don’t necessarily use the services of a drop-in center; they only visit during meetings.”* (CP28).

However, even those suspected of being “in it for the money” appear to derive a sense of mattering and self-worth from being part of the councils, and some take particular pride in serving as council president. As a volunteering location council supporter notes: *“I think that there can be people who, well... have less capacity to comprehend what it means to be homeless... and maybe have less direct motivation to make things better for the daily visitors of drop-in centers. But council membership can also serve as a form of meaningful daytime activity. I believe it’s unfair to dismiss these individuals as merely being in it for the money.”*

They might be involved for personal development; and I do really see people grow here.” (EA4). A long-term member of the client councils shares this point of view, stating that: “I think the majority of the people actually go there not just for the drop-in center, but also to improve themselves. To have something to hold on to. To have an anchor point: On this day, at this time, I go to a meeting. A place where they can engage, participate, reflect. Where they can think things through and bring up ideas.” (CP28).

This suggests that the rationale for participation – both for organizational actors and for service users – is broader in practice than in the formal program design. The councils not only provide a channel through which service users can influence services and help the organization tailor its provision to their needs; for many council members, they also create structure, responsibility, and pride, and thus function as a route toward personal development, even when participants do not explicitly frame their motivations in these terms.

7.2.3 Self-management

Who

The NOIZ program targets people experiencing homelessness, without complex problems – both for the caretaker role and the people using NOIZ. Additionally, these regular users of the program – called *noizers* by employees – are required to have paid work for at least 24 hours per week. The social workers in charge of selecting NOIZ users apply this requirement as well, in practice. Still, it can sometimes be difficult for social workers to assess in a single conversation how suitable prospective participants are for the program, as the NOIZ program manager states:

It’s not always easy to determine whether someone is a good fit. We do our best, and most of the time it works out, but sometimes it doesn’t. Of course, there’s a difference between interacting with someone during the day or in a one-hour conversation and having them stay somewhere overnight. It’s also different how someone interacts with us as staff versus with other visitors. Can they handle the hierarchy? Can they behave appropriately even when no one is watching or holding them accountable? That can sometimes be hard to judge. (F16)

This is reflected as well in the organizational registration of former participants. About 16% of the 170 registered former program users leave because they did not comply with the program requirements (anymore), such as the requirement to speak

to one's social worker every other week, or because they do not have a job, or because of conflicts with others in the program.

The primary co-producers are the caretakers. In the program as designed, caretakers have no complex care problems and do not use drugs. In practice, though, location managers make exceptions to this rule. As one manager states: *"We had a caretaker who was addicted to hard drugs, which actually is a contraindication for the program. But he stayed in the drug consumption room at night. And he handled it just fine, even staying there at night while still getting things done that needed to be done."* (FM2). In practice, location managers select caretakers based on two broad criteria: the extent to which someone benefits from the caretaker role and the degree to which they possess the required qualities. Regarding the first criterion, a location manager notes that: *"I first try to look for people who really need it. Because I really believe in reciprocity; it should be good for both parties. Because it is not something you get paid for, so you need to enjoy it and get something out of it."* (FM3). Relating to the qualities, all location managers, who are responsible for the selection of caretakers, emphasize the importance of reliability. Reliability is considered necessary because caretakers, in the absence of staff, act as the organization's eyes and ears and bear responsibility for the drop-in center. They therefore play an essential role in enforcing rules and creating a safe atmosphere for the users of the NOIZ shelters. Moreover, caretakers hold a position of authority over NOIZ participants, who themselves are often in vulnerable situations. For this reason, reliability is about ensuring that drop-in center staff can trust caretakers to handle their responsibilities with integrity, both toward the location and the NOIZ participants. Consequently, reliability is a requirement set by all location managers.

This is why caretakers are often selected from a pool of active visitors (usually as visitor-volunteers) to the drop-in center, with whom the staff already has a relationship of trust and whose character they are familiar with. Fulfilling the role of caretaker is seen as rather challenging, as the program manager states: *"The caretaker role is quite a challenging position. To begin with, you don't get paid for it. Sure, you get a place to sleep – that's valuable, definitely – but it also comes with a certain level of responsibility. You're essentially responsible for the entire location. (...) And I think not everyone is suited for that."* (F16).

In practice, there may be differences between caretakers at a given drop-in center in the degree to which they possess both criteria. It seems that drop-in center managers find it primarily important that the *teams* of caretakers function well. This means that when there is one very capable caretaker who takes the lead, drop-in center managers – in the absence of more suitable candidates – sometimes allow themselves

a ‘sympathy pick,’ who mainly support the lead caretakers and are seen as unfit to fulfill the role independently.

What

The caretaker roles and responsibilities generally align with the practical and social tasks in the program design. Practically, they manage access to the building, enforce house rules, and oversee the maintenance of the space. One caretaker describes this aspect of the job: *“It’s making sure everything runs smoothly – keeping the place clean, making sure people arrive and leave on time, and that everyone respects the space.”* Socially, their role extends to creating a positive atmosphere and mediating conflicts when necessary. They serve as the first point of contact for participants and are instrumental in fostering a sense of community. A staff member emphasizes this balance: *“Caretakers need to be approachable but also firm. It’s not about being authoritarian but about commanding respect through your actions and attitude.”* (F12).

Furthermore, many caretakers see an even larger role for themselves than is envisioned in the program design. Some caretakers envision a social support role for themselves, such as offering a listening ear to participants. One caretaker explains: *“I leave participants alone and respect them for who they are, making sure they can just be themselves. (...) I see that they often prefer to withdraw, to be alone, to find peace and reconnect with themselves. But occasionally, they need a good conversation. (...) That does them good and gives them a sense of trust. It makes them feel at home.”* (CP15).

Additionally, some caretakers take on a guiding role, helping people with social reintegration. As one caretaker shares: *“I teach people how to get their normal lives back on track. Because some of the people who come here are truly lost. (...) They might have a job, but they also often have lingering problems. That’s why I always say here: we need to be a team. Look out for each other, don’t just think about yourself, but also be there for others. (...) I’m just trying to create a team with the men, and it works really well.”* (CP12).

As already reflected earlier, observations reveal that at some locations, caretakers operate as an equal team, while at others, one caretaker is highly involved, and the other plays more of a supporting or backup role. As a location manager remarks: *“I think it’s good for them to do it together, but in practice, if it were just [caretaker 2], I’m not sure how much the participants would accept from him. I think the other one commands a bit more respect from the participants.”* (FM2). This may stem from factors such as limited proficiency in English or Dutch, a lack of certain key qualities, or perhaps varying levels of dedication to the role. One caretaker offers insight about his colleague:

“Yes, [the other caretaker] is mainly focused on earning money for his family. So, when I need him, he’s often not available. But it’s important for him to support his family, and I respect that. That’s fine with me. (...) I’m more demanding of myself and have a strong sense of responsibility, so I prioritize being present here. If something comes up, like when people are emotional or need help, I think it’s important to be a kind of safety net for the participants. (...) [The other caretaker] wouldn’t be able to do that; he would focus more on practical tasks, like making sure there’s coffee and towels.” (CP13)

This quote shows that there can be variation in the interpretation of the roles and execution of the responsibilities involved in co-production between participants.

As designed in the program, caretakers have no decision-making power in practice. However, they can informally influence the manager of their drop-in center. Furthermore, the responsibilities involved in the program leverage caretakers with some kind of discretionary autonomy in how to approach their tasks and how they approach the users of the NOIZ program. Essentially, this also involves making discretionary decisions about the distribution of services/sanctions to the regular users of NOIZ.

7

Generally, the tasks of the location managers and employees in facilitating the NOIZ program involve selecting caretakers, maintaining contact with the caretakers about the program’s functioning, (at most locations) having a short introductory intake meeting with new users of the NOIZ to explain the location and house rules, and remaining in contact with the coordinators at Team NOIZ. As a location manager notes:

‘My role with the caretakers mainly involves sitting down with them occasionally to check in, ask how things are going, and see what challenges they’re facing. I also work to ensure smooth communication between the [employees at the] drop-in center and the NOIZ, as there can sometimes be mutual frustrations – like us not leaving things tidy in the evening or them not having the place clean in the morning. These issues often require attention, and I try to smooth things over. I stay in touch with the caretakers and keep them informed about new arrivals. Essentially, I act as a communicator between the caretakers and the NOIZ team. For instance, I pass on the names of newcomers who are joining, and ideally, the caretakers will meet with these individuals

independently of me to explain the rules, how everything works, and to show them around the location.’ (FM5).

Beyond this, there is variation between locations in how the tasks at NOIZ are approached. Some professionals working at the drop-in centers, for instance, are also reachable during nighttime, even though they are not physically present. At some locations (as in the quote above), the location managers leave the introduction of new NOIZ users up to the caretakers, whereas at other locations, a drop-in center manager or employee does this, as a location manager notes: *“Well, we have a small contract outlining what is expected of people, but the real intake interviews are handled by the NOIZ department. They conduct the full screening process. Once someone is approved for access to NOIZ, an appointment is scheduled with me. During that meeting, together with [colleague], we mainly go over the house rules, introduce them to [caretaker], and facilitate a walkthrough of the facility to establish that connection. And that’s essentially it.”* (FM2). Finally, regarding the social work support to individual NOIZ users, professional tasks do not seem to substantially differ from their regular work.

Why

As discussed in the previous chapter, the main rationale behind the NOIZ program was to create additional shelter capacity under tight budgetary constraints. The program does so by using existing drop-in centers outside their regular opening hours and relying on caretakers as co-producers rather than paid night staff. In practice, this has indeed expanded capacity: NOIZ has created additional shelter places at eight locations, housing around forty people in total. Between 2020 and June 2024, at least 170 service users have made use of the program (including both caretakers and participants), thereby ensuring that these individuals did not have to sleep on the streets. The underlying idea is that participants use their free stay at NOIZ to save money while working with a social worker to actively search for a longer-term housing solution. Box 7.3 below addresses this in more detail.

Within the organization, several considerations motivate employees to facilitate this form of co-production. For drop-in center managers, selecting caretakers is important both to ensure trust in those who handle critical responsibilities – such as holding keys and enforcing rules – and to support individuals they consider “deserving” of this opportunity, reflecting a principle of reciprocity. As one manager explains: *“What convinced me was the chance to offer caretakers a place”* (FM5). The opportunity to provide shelter is thus an important reason for staff, not only for caretakers themselves. On the participants’ side, shelter is a key material incentive. Roughly speaking, two broad groups of caretakers emerged in the interviews: those

who have no legal entitlement to regular shelter in the Netherlands (for instance, because they are undocumented), and those who have long avoided regular shelters out of distrust and prefer life on the streets. The latter group includes, for example, two Dutch caretakers who had been homeless for years and deliberately stayed away from formal services but eventually obtained shelter through their caretaker role. One of them, who spent seven years sleeping at Schiphol Airport, describes the shift:

Box 7.3 NOIZ's record

NOIZ's record

The underlying idea is that participants use their free stay at NOIZ to save money and, together with a social worker, actively search for more stable housing solutions. The extent to which this approach succeeds can be assessed through data from the internal NOIZ records. The analyzed data of former participants runs until June 2024. In total, 170 people have made use of NOIZ services (including both caretakers and participants). This figure covers both the regular NOIZ program and the office-based NOIZ project at the Stopera. Additionally, there are records of 42 users of crisis beds, but as these beds are less focused on facilitating transitions, they are excluded from the statistics. Of the 170 recorded users, the following reasons for leaving NOIZ were documented by their social worker (see Figure 7.1 below).

In 31% of cases, NOIZ appears to function exactly as intended: these individuals either found their own housing (20%) or transitioned to temporary housing projects (11%). Several success stories stand out. For instance, one respondent highlighted a participant who, during their stay at NOIZ, secured a job, completed a training program, and transitioned to independent housing. Another cited a participant who has since started their own business and now lives independently. Transitions to social shelters, accommodation within personal networks, hotels, LVV's (*Landelijke Vreemdelingen Voorzieningen*, National Facilities for Undocumented Migrants), and repatriation can also be considered positive outcomes (accounting for an additional 25%). For example, a participant transitioning to social shelter might indicate they were not as self-reliant as initially assessed, but NOIZ could have served as an effective bridging solution. The same applies to participants who moved on to accommodations within their network or to hotels. Similarly, repatriation or moving to another municipality can be seen as positive, assuming these transitions provide participants with better prospects.

However, this relatively positive outcome contrasts with the 21% of cases where NOIZ seems to have been less effective. Some participants left due to conflicts or incidents (5%), while others failed to meet eligibility criteria or adhere to agreements with their social workers (11%). This includes cases where participants used their sleeping arrangements too infrequently or repeatedly arrived under the influence. For these individuals, NOIZ was evidently no longer a suitable option. Additionally, 5% of participants are known to have returned to living on the streets after their stay.

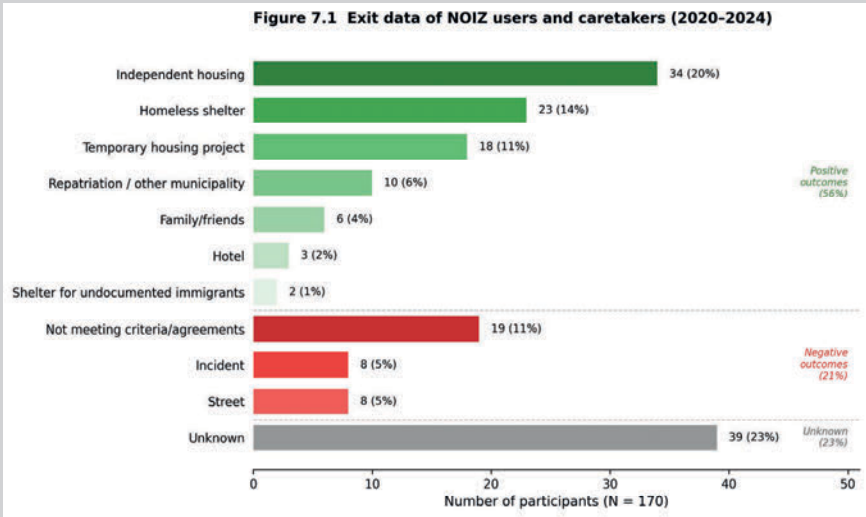


Figure 7.1 Exit data of NOIZ users and caretakers (2020-2024).

They [the airport staff] weren't too happy about that – not because I was causing trouble, I don't use drugs, so nobody was bothered by me. But still. They didn't like it. After that I went to the drop-in centers. (...) Then came corona, and someone told me “you really need to have a place now, you cannot just stay out.” At first, I wasn't too sure about it, but then I got this place here – just to sleep – and that was fantastic. Not long after I arrived, I just started helping out. (CP15)

Social workers see NOIZ as a valuable tool to support their clients. For the organizational management, the program represents an opportunity to emphasize its frontrunner role in tackling pressing problems in the city, aligned with their organizational mission.

While shelter is a key reason for caretakers' participation, it is not the only benefit. As one staff member remarked: *"It shouldn't be underestimated how transformative the caretaking role can be for some individuals. It gives them a position they're often very happy with. And if it's the right role for the right person, it can change someone's life in meaningful ways – helping them see that they are valuable, capable of responsibility, and able to make a difference for others"* (F16). All six interviewed caretakers expressed positive views about the NOIZ program. One caretaker commented: *"I just think it's a really positive initiative for everyone; for the caretakers, the house, and the people who come here."* (CP15). Most also mentioned finding fulfillment in helping others: *"As a caretaker, you're also helping people. That's rewarding"* (CP13). By doing so, the interviewed caretakers also note that their participation has contributed to personal growth.

In sum, caretakers participate in this co-production arrangement not only because it provides shelter, but also because they feel connected to the specific drop-in center as a place, to the staff working there, and because they are motivated to help enable shelter for others. For some, the role offers structure, recognition, and a sense of responsibility that contributes to personal growth.

7.3 Between intentions and practice

Having analyzed the design and implementation of the four co-production programs, we can now assess to what extent the practice of co-production reflects their original intentions. In general, the answer is positive. Across all programs, the core intentions of co-production are clearly recognizable in day-to-day practice: participants generally perform the tasks envisioned for them, professionals largely assume the roles outlined on paper, and the central rationales of the programs remain visible in how they are talked about and enacted. Given the concerns mentioned in Chapter 2 – about tokenistic user involvement, the tendency of professionals to retain control, and the particular difficulty of co-producing with vulnerable groups – this is not self-evident. In light of these expectations, these programs show that, in general, co-production with vulnerable citizens can be successful.

At the same time, the alignment between intentions and practice is never complete. Some differences between intentions and practice are structural, whereas others are dynamic. The remainder of this section unpacks these patterns of convergence and divergence along six dimensions:

- Integration and segmentation
- Target group and participants
- Intended and actual co-producers' activities
- Participants' powers
- Professionals' tasks and authority
- Rationale and results

Integration and segmentation

On paper, the organizational logic of the four co-production programs appears clear-cut. At DRG, participation is segmented: users can engage in practical tasks as visitor-volunteers, join the client council for policy input, or take on responsibility as caretakers at NOIZ. Each role has its own structure, function, and support. At NuNN, by contrast, all these dimensions – daily tasks, decision-making, and self-management – are bundled into a single program. Participants live in a self-managed shelter and are expected to take part in both chores and governance.

In practice, however, these boundaries do not always hold, pointing to informal segmentation. Some participants at NuNN consistently run their weekly shifts but remain silent in meetings – sometimes because they find the discussions hard to follow, sometimes because they seem disconnected or disinterested. Newcomers often begin with a focus on practical tasks, with involvement in decision-making gradually increasing – if it happens at all. Though the model aspires full participation, the reality is often more fragmented, shaped by individual capacities and preferences.

At DRG, the opposite dynamic unfolds. While the programs are formally separate, participation tends to spill across them. Users often begin as visitor-volunteers and, over time, may move into the client council or take on caretaker roles at NOIZ. Several respondents fulfill multiple roles. Instead of functioning as isolated programs, these forms of co-production often operate as interconnected programs.

In short, the distinction between integrated and segmented co-production models is sharper in design than in practice. In everyday service provision, participation is differentiated within NuNN and layered across programs at DRG.

Target group and participants

Across the four programs, the intended target groups are relatively clear on paper, but implementation is more complicated. Two systematic forms of divergence emerge. First, some people who fall within the formal target group cannot or do not participate in co-production roles because of language barriers, psychiatric

instability, or the demands of rough sleeping. Second, people whose vulnerabilities formally exceed program criteria sometimes do participate, either because staff make pragmatic exceptions or because of uncertainty in the selection process.

At NuNN, the intended target group consists of homeless men with complex needs but sufficient self-reliance to function without continuous supervision. This boundary is usually upheld in practice, but under pressure. Municipal expectations of high occupancy and the everyday realities of homelessness sometimes push the shelter toward admitting individuals whose needs exceed what a self-managed setting can absorb. Over time, the participant group and social workers navigate a recurring tension between inclusion and collective capacity. Within user groups, almost all guests who wish to take an active role in self-management can become volunteers, and there are usually enough participants to keep the shelter running. At the same time, some residents – particularly those who do not speak Dutch or English – have limited opportunity to participate meaningfully in meetings or decision-making.

The visitor-volunteer program at DRG shows relatively few discrepancies between intended and actual participants. This is partly because the formal criteria are broad – the main requirement is being a visitor to the drop-in centers – and partly because recruitment is largely staff-led. Employees actively invite visitors whom they consider likely to benefit from participation and to be able to handle the responsibilities involved. As a result, the group of visitor-volunteers largely corresponds to the envisioned target group, but is at the same time shaped by staff assessment.

The client councils display a more pronounced difference between the intended target group and actual participants. Formally, all (formerly) homeless visitors of the drop-in centers can join. In practice, the councils are carried by a relatively small, stable core of members – many in their second or third term, often housed or in more stable shelter arrangements, and frequently also active as visitor-volunteers. People who sleep rough, women, and visitors who do not speak Dutch or English are structurally underrepresented. For many of them, the demands of regular attendance, concentration in long meetings, and abstract deliberation are hard to reconcile with the daily strain of homelessness; others are simply not interested. Furthermore, some councils struggle to reach sufficient participants. While location councils can have up to eight members, local councils almost never reach that number. Still, most council members do have extensive lived experience with homelessness and with the drop-in centers, so the difference is less between users and non-users than between different segments of the user population. At the same time, there are moments when specific council constellations become unbalanced because several members

rarely visit the drop-in centers anymore; such moments do reflect larger differences between intentions and practice.

At NOIZ, the implementation of the program's intended target group – those who are self-reliant and without complex care needs – also proves difficult to realize in a straightforward way. In practice, it is not always possible to draw a clear line between who fits in NOIZ facilities and who does not. Moreover, staff sometimes deliberately make pragmatic exceptions to target-group rules, for instance by overriding the requirement that caretakers must be sober when they trust a specific person to handle the responsibilities. This means that NOIZ sometimes serves people who are more vulnerable than the program design envisages, while others who formally qualify may be screened out because professionals doubt whether they will fit in the specific setting.

In general, the implementation of target group criteria across the programs aligns reasonably well with their design. Still, two kinds of divergence emerge. First, certain barriers – such as rough sleeping, language barriers, or psychiatric instability – can prevent people from participating in co-production roles, even when they fall within the program's intended scope. Second, people who are more vulnerable than the program technically allows sometimes still participate – either by accident or as a pragmatic decision made by staff.

Intended and actual co-producers' activities

Across the four programs, co-producers' activities are largely carried out as envisioned. Yet again, several divergences appear. Sometimes participants contribute less than expected, which can undermine the functioning of the program. Other times, participants take on more than their role prescribes, potentially blurring lines between co-producers and staff.

At NuNN, participants are expected to run three eight-hour shifts per week and to co-govern the shelter through weekly residents' meetings. These core duties are generally fulfilled, but unevenly. Some participants do not show up for shifts, or treat night shifts as opportunities to sleep, leaving tasks to others. Complaints about poorly prepared meals or insufficient cleaning recur in meetings. At the same time, participants often compensate for one another's shortcomings, taking over shifts or tasks when they see others struggling. Participation in meetings is similarly varied: some co-producers speak frequently and shape decisions; others are present but barely follow the discussion, let alone contribute to it. When too many participants disengage, the pressure on the more active group members increases. Over time, this

can shift: as groups change, levels of engagement, reliability, and mutual support also fluctuate.

In the visitor-volunteer program, the match between intended and actual activities is relatively strong. Volunteers perform the practical tasks foreseen in the program: cooking, cleaning, managing showers, doing laundry, collecting donations, and participating in clean-up crews. As trust grows, some are given more responsibility, such as handling cash or interacting with external stakeholders. These expansions remain within the spirit of the program and reflect a pragmatic, person-centered scaling of responsibilities.

In the client councils, the intended activities go beyond mere meeting attendance: members are expected to inform and consult their constituents, recruit new candidates, and prepare for meetings by reading agendas and documents. Here, divergence is more marked. A subset of members takes these tasks seriously and do even more than strictly expected of them – not only visiting centers regularly, observing daily dynamics, but also initiating activities such as fundraising or setting up cleaning crews. Others primarily attend meetings and rarely visit the drop-in centers outside these occasions, limiting their ability to represent or stay connected to the broader user base. As a result, the representational aspect of their role is unevenly fulfilled.

At NOIZ, caretakers generally perform the practical and social tasks described in the program design: managing access, enforcing house rules, and keeping the space clean and usable as a drop-in center during the day. Yet here, too, there is differentiation. Some caretakers see themselves mainly as practical hosts; others assume broader informal support roles, offering a listening ear, mediating conflicts, and actively facilitating participants' social reintegration. Within caretaker teams, one person may take the lead while another fulfills more of a supporting role. In such cases, the team as a whole meets program expectations, but responsibilities are unequally distributed.

In short, co-producers' core activities broadly align with program designs, albeit with considerable variation across individuals, groups, and moments in time. In practice, much of the work is carried by a subset of participants who are willing and able to take on more responsibilities, while others contribute less than envisaged or focus on a narrower slice of their role. This does not prevent the programs from functioning, but it does mean that their viability depends on a critical mass of engaged co-producers in each setting.

Participants' influence

In most cases, the powers participants acquire through co-production align with the programs' design. Some differences do emerge.

At NuNN, participants formally decide who is admitted, promoted, sanctioned, and which rules are made and how they are applied. They do this in residents' meetings where social workers advise but do not vote. In practice, however, many decisions are made informally before the meeting. Participants sometimes describe the meeting as a puppet show where decisions are affirmed rather than debated. Still, the core authority remains with the group. Occasionally, social workers draw clear boundaries – especially on safety or municipal policies. These interventions are generally accepted, but underscore that participants' autonomy has limits.

In the visitor-volunteer program, power is intentionally minimal. Volunteers perform practical tasks and may exercise some discretion, such as managing access to showers, handling cash, or resolving minor disputes. These responsibilities are extended as trust grows but remain bounded. While volunteers take on more tasks as they grow into the role, the program remains focused on action, rather than voice, and discretion remains limited.

The client councils are designed to co-govern. Councils have formal advisory and consent rights and can influence policy. This often works as intended. At the same time, two issues emerge. First, the exercise of power depends on the organizational representatives' efforts to inform and consult the council, which can differ per specific council. Second, not all council members stay close to the base they are expected to represent. Several long-term members rarely visit the drop-in centers outside of meetings, limiting their responsiveness. As a result, their influence is not always grounded in representation.

In the NOIZ program, caretakers have no formal governance role. Decisions about admissions, contract extensions, and program rules are made by professionals. Caretakers do, however, possess peer discretion: they enforce house rules and can deny participants access for a night in cases of misconduct. In practice, this arrangement broadly aligns with the design. Caretakers use their discretion in day-to-day management, while maintaining close contact with staff, who retain ultimate authority and can intervene in case of conflict or crisis.

In short, participants across programs tend to have the influence envisioned in the programs. While there can be some more differences between intentions and practice

at NuNN and the client council, these are also precisely the programs that aim to facilitate the most decision-making influence for participants.

Intended and actual professionals' activities

Professional support remains essential in co-production. Across the programs, professionals are expected to facilitate, support, or supervise co-production. In practice their roles generally align with these intentions, but across programs, professionals sometimes take different roles than envisioned, depending on the situation.

At NuNN, professional support is formally consultative, facilitating co-production by preparing agendas, advising, providing individual support, and managing organizational affairs. However, when participants avoid difficult decisions or (want to) make choices that conflict with the shelter's responsibilities or values, social workers occasionally step in more assertively. These moments are rare, but reveal how professionals serve to create guardrails, protecting the long-term viability of the shelter. Their influence is not directive by design, but in practice, it can be.

In the visitor-volunteer program, professionals generally do provide continuous, directive support, aligning with the program design. In practice, their activities are also flexible; they coach, assign responsibilities, and sometimes intervene. In doing so, they take a person-centered approach, entrusting more responsibility to participants as they grow.

Within the client councils, professional support is provided by external advisors and, to varying degrees, by location managers, organizational management, and the director who serve as dialogue partners. Here, professional activities partly deviate from their formal outline. While external advisors and minute-takers are meant to support without steering, in practice they often shape agendas and stabilize discussions, especially when meetings become tense or disorganized. Meanwhile, location managers' involvement reportedly varies. Some actively support participation by reminding members, sharing information, and responding to feedback. Others are more passive, which limits the influence and responsiveness of location councils.

In the NOIZ program, professional support is designed to be at a distance but directive. Formal professional activities include screening participants, addressing incidents, and checking in periodically. In practice, while professionals are not present at night, they are closely involved in the program, often checking in weekly or

daily with their caretakers and keeping close relations with them. Some professionals even stay approachable during evenings and nights in case of emergencies. However, in general, the intentions and practice align.

In short, professional activities largely align with program intentions, but differences emerge between types of professionals and individual styles. In some circumstances, professionals take on more active roles than designed, either out of necessity or pragmatism, whereas in others, they take a more facilitative role.

Espoused and actual benefits

Each co-production program was built on a distinct set of expected benefits. In practice, these benefits are clearly recognizable, but they materialize unevenly across users, groups, and moments in time.

At NuNN, the core intended benefits are twofold: to offer a shelter run by homeless people themselves and, through this, to foster resocialization. The first aim is largely realized: despite fluctuations in group ownership, the shelter has operated according to its self-management model for nearly three decades. The second aim is more selective. For some participants, self-management provides daily structure, a sense of usefulness, and a stepping stone toward more stable housing or renewed engagement in society. For these residents, the program does not work as intended. NuNN thereby seems to deliver on its espoused benefits, but not for everyone and not to the same degree.

For the visitor-volunteer program, the intended benefits are to support participants' personal development and to strengthen the day-to-day running and atmosphere of the drop-in centers. This alignment between intended and actual benefits is relatively strong. Most interviewed visitor-volunteers describe meaningful gains in terms of daily structure, a sense of purpose, and feeling useful to others. Staff members also report that, when collaboration goes well, volunteers reduce their workload and contribute to a more welcoming environment. At the same time, not all volunteers make large next steps toward regular employment or fully independent living. Similarly, including visitor-volunteers in the drop-in centers also does not always lead to a more welcoming environment.

The client councils were designed to embed user voice structurally in policy and organizational decision-making. In practice, this goal is often met. Councils are consulted on key issues and have demonstrably influenced policies on food, visitor suspension, opening hours, and renovation plans. Participants and professionals

generally experience the councils as meaningful arenas for dialogue. Yet the benefits are uneven. Where councils are small, less representative, or weakly connected to daily visitors, their influence and responsiveness are more limited. Therefore, the benefits of representation and making services more responsive to user needs and wishes are lacking. Nevertheless, participants often do experience individual benefits that the program does not primarily intend, like personal growth, responsibility, and resocialization.

NOIZ was set up primarily to create additional shelter capacity for people who would otherwise be left without a bed, while also using existing facilities more efficiently. These intended benefits are clearly visible in practice. The program has created dozens of extra sleeping places and has offered shelter to hundreds of people who might otherwise have slept outside. Internal exit data suggest that for a substantial share of participants, NOIZ functions as intended: they move on to more stable housing arrangements or to settings better suited to their needs. At the same time, a notable proportion leave the program because of conflicts, non-compliance with agreements, or a return to street homelessness. Here too, the benefits of co-production materialize clearly for some, but less so for others.

Espoused benefits and reported outcomes largely align across the four programs. The co-productions do what they were set up to do: they bring vulnerable service users into co-producing roles, provide them with concrete responsibilities and opportunities for influence, and generate recognizable benefits for both participants and organizations. At the same time, these benefits are selective and contingent. Co-production with vulnerable citizens generally works in these settings – often more than the literature would lead us to expect – but not always, and not for everyone.

Conclusion

The four co-production programs function, for the most part, as intended. All have been running for at least five years, and often much longer. They continue to attract support from both participants and professionals. In everyday practice, the core principles of the programs are manifest: service users do much of the work they are formally entrusted with, professionals broadly assume the roles outlined on paper, and the central rationales of the programs remain visible in how respondents talk about and enact co-production.

This is noteworthy. These programs largely succeed in engaging a very vulnerable target group in co-production and in providing them with concrete activities and meaningful influence that are, in important respects, actually realized in practice.

At the same time, the match between intentions and practice is not perfect – nor would we expect it to be in any organization. Some discrepancies are structural and persistent: people who sleep rough, face pronounced language barriers, or experience significant psychiatric instability often struggle to participate fully, even when they formally fall within the target group. Others occasionally participate despite exceeding formal eligibility criteria, for instance because staff make pragmatic exceptions or selection processes are inherently uncertain.

Beyond these structural patterns, many differences are more fluid. Participation, influence, and activity levels fluctuate between individuals, groups, locations, and moments in time. Some co-producers carry a disproportionate share of the work; others contribute less than intended. Group constellations change, and with them the degree of openness, responsibility, and mutual support.

To understand why alignment between intentions and practice fluctuates – and under which conditions co-production with vulnerable citizens works as intended – we therefore need to zoom in on the day-to-day processes through which co-production unfolds.

Empirical section II:

Daily processes of co-production

The previous chapters compared each program's intentions on paper with what happens in practice. To understand these practical realities, we must examine the day-to-day *process* of co-production in more detail. This section, therefore, sets out to answer sub-question 4: *Which processes shape the everyday practice of co-production?* This general sub-question is further specified in the two chapters that follow, with each chapter focusing on a distinct dimension of the process.

As the upcoming two chapters will show, the everyday practice of co-production is largely shaped by social dynamics. In the group-based programs studied here, participants live, work, and make decisions together, creating a complex social environment. This creates two key dynamics in co-production: *among* participants themselves, but also in the interaction *between* participants and the frontline professionals supporting them.

Understanding co-production therefore requires analyzing these two interrelated dimensions. The first is the internal group dynamic between participants. As the next chapter shows, co-production can foster mutual support and shared ownership, but the same dynamics can also lead to peer pressure, conflict, and exclusion.

The second, equally essential dimension, is the dynamic between frontline professionals and the participant group. Frontline workers must constantly navigate the tensions inherent to sharing power with vulnerable service users. Their role becomes a continuous balancing act between guiding the process and stepping back, between upholding professional values while facilitating user autonomy, and between managing internal responsibilities and facing external accountability. Accordingly, this section analyzes two interrelated processes:

- Chapter 8: Group dynamics among service users
- Chapter 9: Frontline dynamics

By examining these dynamics in sequence, this section shifts the analytical focus from comparing programs to analyzing dynamics, and in later chapters, conditions. The next chapter addresses group dynamics among service users, followed by a chapter on frontline dynamics.



Chapter 8.

Group dynamics

Introduction

The co-production programs we study do more than facilitate collaboration between service users and providers: they also generate social groups and group dynamics among service users. These groups are not created by co-production alone; the underlying service settings – drop-in centers and shelters – already foster group formation. Co-production, however, adds new layers by creating additional groups tied to shared responsibility, thereby intensifying the consequences of these dynamics.

Once groups take shape, group dynamics follow. These dynamics can be crucial to how co-production unfolds, as one former NuNN social worker came to realize:

Something I only really understood after a few years on the job was that, ‘Wait... you’re dealing with a group.’ Even close up, you’re still on the sidelines watching the dynamics – and you’re not here during nights or weekends when much of it happens. Suddenly I remembered a book on group dynamics, dug it out, and dove in. It was an eye-opener: group waves, how subgroups form in a larger group, how they interact and evolve. It became my specialty: seeing the big picture, the shifts, the interpersonal currents, and spotting early when too many cliques form and start working against each other. (F9)

This insight captures the core of what follows: co-production generates groups and relies on group dynamics, which in turn affect how co-production unfolds.

This chapter therefore asks: *How do group dynamics among service users shape the everyday practice of co-production, and how are these dynamics regulated within co-production programs?* It first examines the types and characteristics of participant groups across the programs, focusing on factors such as size, stability, and vulnerability. It then analyzes the informal and formal mechanisms through which groups regulate themselves in co-production.

8.1 Characteristics of groups: size, stability, and participants’ vulnerabilities

Before we unpack how group dynamics pan out in co-production, it is first important to note that the group dynamics emerging in the programs are shaped by the structural features of the groups and programs themselves. Across the programs

studied, three elements seem especially influential for the dynamics created: size, group stability, and participant vulnerability. Each affects how groups form, how norms are established, and how participation and conflict unfold. In addition, the settings in which these groups operate – for instance, occasional meetings in the client council versus living and working together in NuNN – shape how consequential these dynamics become for participants.

8.1.1 Size

The number of participants in a setting shapes group dynamics in several ways. Larger groups tend to fragment: subgroups form, cliques emerge, and free-riding becomes harder to contain. Communication also becomes more difficult, especially in deliberative settings like NuNN or the client council, where meetings in larger groups often turn chaotic and prone to conflict. At NuNN in particular, subgroups form along different fracture lines: those who reliably run their shifts versus those who slack; volunteers and guests who live in the shelter versus managers who appear only during meetings or their shifts. Substance use creates another axis of affiliation. As one social worker put it: *“Suppose you have four heroin users: they’ll order it together, use it together, start every day together. Alcoholics drink together and feast together – even plot things together. Those groups form organically and you really can’t stop that”* (F9). This shows that, in larger groups, subgroups can develop into cliques that attempt to steer decision-making in the shelter.

While decisions are less consequential here, similar dynamics are visible at DRG’s larger visitors’ council. There, too, subgroups sometimes form that attack or systematically criticize one another; one council member even described occasional “bullying” behavior (CP22). These cliques are, however, typically more fluid and less cohesive than at NuNN, as council members do not live together and meet less frequently. As a result, conflicts and alliances in the visitors’ council are easier to escape and generally remain confined to the meeting room, whereas at NuNN they can spill over into everyday life in the shelter.

The NOIZ program takes a different approach. From the outset, the program was designed for small groups to enable oversight by the caretakers and prevent social fragmentation. As the organization’s director explains: *“People quarrel, conflict, that’s just what happens. So, from the start, we said: it must be a small, compact group. Forget scale; keep it tight and manageable, so everyone knows each other. Once you go above six, you already feel it’s too many. The larger the group, the easier it is for people to duck out, do their own thing, or place themselves outside the group”* (M4).

Another location manager echoed this point: *“We’ve got two caretakers, four NOIZ sleepers, and a crisis bed – so seven people. Maybe that’s the reason why it works. If you put twenty people in here, you’d get a completely different dynamic”* (FM5). The limits of group size were put to the test when DRG launched a temporary NOIZ pilot in collaboration with the City of Amsterdam. Housed in a vacant municipal office space, this version expanded to sixteen participants and lacked regular contact with professional staff, as it was not located in a drop-in center. The organization concluded that this model put serious strain on caretakers. Conflicts were reported around the cleaning of shared spaces and communal items. An internal evaluation report noted that: *“Group dynamics are crucial within a NOIZ. No matter how self-reliant people are, living together in a large, rotating group with little privacy would be a challenge for anyone. These dynamics should not be underestimated and can lead to problems.”* This lesson extends beyond NOIZ. Across co-production programs, group size can affect the cohesion, the ability of groups to self-regulate, and the frequency of conflict.

8.1.2 Turnover and stability

Participant groups within the co-production programs are in constant flux. The nature of the services means that people join and leave on a rolling basis – sometimes weekly. This is especially visible at NuNN, where new guests and volunteers arrive almost weekly, while others leave the program. In other programs, this turnover is less pronounced but still present. At NOIZ, for example, weekly changes in group composition are common at most locations. The client councils show a bit more stability – especially at the location level – but even in the larger visitors’ council, membership shifts are frequent, with new participants joining or old ones dropping out almost monthly.

Amid this fluctuation, many groups do develop a stable core of long-term participants. All programs have participants who have been active for multiple years in the program. This continuity can act as a stabilizing force: long-timers often carry norms, pass on routines, and help socialize newcomers into the group.

8.1.3 Vulnerability and capacity

While working (and sometimes living) together in co-production can be demanding for any group, participants’ individual vulnerabilities do shape how group dynamics unfold. Not every vulnerability leads to disruption, but in co-production, where participation is tied to responsibility, such challenges can place additional strain on both service users and staff. Issues such as substance use, psychiatric disorders, intellectual disabilities, and behavioral problems can affect how participants interact with others, how they take up responsibility, and how conflict emerges or escalates. Participants’ vulnerabilities and uneven competencies may lead to perceptions of free-riding or can put uneven strain on other participants.

For example, while the NOIZ program aims to select people with fewer vulnerabilities, some participants turn out to have more care needs than initially assessed. Hidden substance use and undiagnosed psychiatric conditions occasionally led to tense group interactions and friction with caretakers. One location manager recalled a case in which two caretakers, both supposedly abstinent, were secretly drinking heavily in the evenings and creating unrest for the other NOIZ users. Another described how one resident, later found to be psychotic (and inadmissible under program requirements if it were known beforehand), disrupted the atmosphere and even destroyed furniture during an episode of acute distress. These examples illustrate how participants' and service users' vulnerabilities can affect the dynamics of a specific group. Psychotic issues or heavy substance abuse can sometimes lead to chaotic atmospheres in which conflict is more present.

Such issues are not confined to NOIZ. In all programs, staff and participants describe moments where vulnerabilities challenged the cohesion or functioning of the group. At the same time, not all issues necessarily have a negative impact on a group's collective capacity. In several programs, for example, there were participants whose drug use did not meaningfully affect their ability to function in the group. Conversely, others were occasionally criticized for being too intoxicated to carry out their tasks adequately.

The impact of vulnerability also becomes visible by contrast. Respondents at DRG frequently compared the NOIZ's small groups with relatively limited vulnerabilities to the organization's larger shelter facilities during winter, where larger groups and higher concentrations of vulnerability coincided. As one visitor-volunteer and council member, who also worked night shifts in the winter program, explained: *"Some people come in already angry – demanding this or that. Others are drunk. You have to explain clearly what's allowed and what's not. If you don't, they flip out, shout, cause problems. And some guys, they've got real psychiatric issues and can really snap"* (CP19).

In short, group size, stability, and vulnerability appear to play a role in the dynamics that arise within the programs. This is not exclusive to co-production but applies to the general atmosphere in the drop-in centers. For example, one of DRG's location managers noted during COVID the importance of vulnerability and group size for the social dynamic in the center:

There is more calm inside. We're only allowed to admit fewer people, so we're working with three shifts. At any given time, we now have only twenty people in the house – it used to be around sixty. As a result, we've had about three-quarters fewer incidents of aggression, and there have

been almost no suspensions. Of course, that's also because people have actually slept at night. If you're being chased around by the police all night, having to move from one place to another, you end up drinking. And someone who's been drinking or using all night doesn't arrive in the best of moods in the morning.

Group dynamics are therefore essential to co-production, but not unique to it.

While group dynamics play an important role across programs, their salience and form vary considerably. In NuNN, NOIZ, and the client council, participants form more defined and sustained groups. These groups are affected by size, stability, and participant vulnerability, which in turn influence how cohesive or conflict-prone the group becomes. Table 8.1 below summarizes these characteristics per program.

Table 8.1 Dynamics between service users

Program	Main dynamics
<i>NuNN</i> (+/- 21 residents (of whom +/-7 volunteers and +/- 14 guests) +7 managers living in separate shared housing.)	A large, mixed group with weekly turnover. Despite this, a stable core group sets norms. Subgroups emerge around, for example, commitment (e.g., who runs shifts reliably), place of residence (guests and visitors who live in the shelter, while managers live outside of the shelter), and substance use. Autonomy invites ownership but also peer pressure, politics, and conflict. No strict exclusion of people with vulnerabilities (addiction, mental health), which can occasionally make problems prevalent in the setting, inviting chaos and conflict.
<i>Visitor volunteers</i> (120 monthly participants in all drop-in centers; large differences per center but often 3-5 active at the same time)	Volunteers overlap only for short shifts under staff supervision, in the daily bustle of the drop-in center. There is limited actual group formation through co-production, but individual ties are built – among participants and with staff. Some tasks involve user-discretion, subtly reshaping volunteer-user interactions. Still, group dynamics are present in the drop-centers in which visitors-volunteers operate. The use of visitor-volunteers affects this dynamic, and vice versa.
<i>Client councils</i> (+/- 4 per location council; 10-20 at the visitors' council; 4-6 at central council)	Members do not work live or work together, but many share a longer meeting history across multiple councils and see each other in the drop-in centers. Group dynamics are pressing in the meeting room, but escapable. They mainly surface in shifting coalitions, personal rivalries – coalescing around personal likes and dislikes, as well as the distribution of roles in and rewards of participation.
<i>NOIZ</i> Up to seven people per location (2 caretakers, 4 NOIZ users, 1 crisis bed	Deliberately small living groups with limited formal powers create manageable groups for caretakers. Caretakers may stay for more than a year, while others stay 6 months at most. Participants are pre-screened for lower vulnerability, yet occasionally unanticipated issues such as mental disorders or hidden substance use can still destabilize groups. Intimacy of the setting means that conflict quickly becomes everyone's business.

As Table 8.1 shows, the group dynamics differ between the programs. Still, similar dynamics do arise in multiple programs, relating to the type of group (size, vulnerabilities of participants, stability), as well as relating to the processes.

These group dynamics are important for how co-production unfolds and need to be managed. The next section explores how they are regulated.

8.2 Regulating group dynamics

Some social dynamics – mutual support, small disputes, frictions around privacy or mess – seem inherent to any group-based shelter setting. *“I’ve stayed in a shelter before, so this kind of environment doesn’t really surprise me,”* one participant at NuNN remarked about the shelter atmosphere, initially marked by friendliness and mutual support among participants but increasingly characterized by shared irritation and conflict (CP2).

Yet there is something fundamentally different about the group dynamics in co-production. When professional support is designed to be limited or consultative, co-production programs must embed mechanisms for groups to self-regulate, placing explicit responsibilities and powers in the hands of participants. This also creates formal hierarchies and power dynamics between participants and participants vis-à-vis other service users. As a result, everyday social dynamics, reflected in the quote above, become something more consequential. Thus, in co-production, group dynamics are not only informal and emergent but are also shaped actively by the structure of the programs themselves.

Group dynamics in these co-production settings have dual potential. In many instances, living and/or working together fosters a sense of mutual support: people help each other, teach one another how the program works, and hold each other accountable in ways that professionals often cannot. At the same time, however, the very same group dynamics may give rise to friction, peer pressure, or recurring conflict. This dual character is key to understanding co-production: group dynamics drive co-production, but they can occasionally also derail it.

In what follows, we explore how groups in co-production regulate themselves. To do this, I distinguish formal and informal modes of self-regulation and between individual and collective actions. This yields four mechanisms, as depicted in Table 8.2: (1) informal exchanges, (2) peer socialization, (3) peer discretion, and (4) peer

governance. These are not watertight categories – many situations blend elements of multiple types at once, and they all influence each other – but they allow us to zoom in on the specific forms that self-regulation takes across programs and moments. Whereas the informal mechanisms are likely to be present in every group, the two formal mechanisms are specific to co-production.

Table 8.2 Mechanisms for self-regulation in groups

	Individual	Collective
Informal	Individual exchanges	Peer socialization
Formal	Peer discretion	Peer governance

8.2.1 Individual exchanges

The first dimension of self-regulation is informal and individual. In these moments, group dynamics surface not through formal structures or collective decision-making, but through day-to-day interactions between (individual) service users. These interactions can be positive and supportive, but also conflictual.

One of the most common expressions of this form is spontaneous support. Several participants describe moments of stepping in for others or helping out. A NuNN participant illustrates this kind of solidarity: *“When someone new comes in, I do feel responsible to help them feel at home. I’m often the person who’ll sit down next to them and start a chat – mainly about how they ended up here”* (CP5). Other examples range from sharing cigarettes or lending money to simply making time for a conversation or cracking a joke.

Some people may also offer practical support or informal guidance. One NOIZ-caretaker details a series of moments in which he supports residents – from carrying someone’s luggage *“because she physically just can’t manage the stairs,”* to confronting a heavy-drinking NOIZ-user by recalling that a former caretaker broke his leg falling downstairs drunk: *“I said, “we don’t want that to happen to you.” And it landed. It really did. And now she pulls herself together more. Of course, it’s tempting to drink, especially here, to forget things. But I keep an eye on it. (...) I just do that by nature. Because you live in a group. And when you live in a group, that comes naturally”* (CP13).

Participants’ support for each other may also consist of peer learning. For instance, one of NuNN’s participants states that: *“I’ve been able to grow here, personally. I’ve learned to grit my teeth – something I never used to do. To solve things by talking instead of using my fists. (...) That shift mostly came from others telling me, ‘Listen, if you hit someone – even with an open hand – you’ll lose everything here.’ And that made me stop and think: is it really worth*

it?” (CP9). Such reflections suggest how group life can strengthen self-awareness and lead to instances of social learning.

Yet the same intimacy that fosters support can also spark friction. In these programs, co-production means being exposed not only to others’ support but also their irritations and problems – and in shelters, problems are plentiful. A drop-in center staff member, for instance, remarks about one visitor-volunteer that *“He can lose it quite quickly,”* about his interactions with regular visitors (F11). At NuNN and NOIZ, similar tensions arise from practical conditions: limited privacy, poor insulation, and shared spaces mean that one person’s music, cooking, or mess is another’s irritation. *“It’s definitely not luxurious,”* one of DRG’s social workers remarked about NOIZ, *“You don’t really have a space for yourself. So yeah, there’s friction”* (F15).

This friction can sometimes lead to minor conflict. One of DRG’s location managers recalls one such moment between two caretakers, after someone had been drinking and another had smoked weed: *“I don’t know what exactly went wrong there, but for a moment, they weren’t getting along. So they disagreed, and that night I called Amir, and the next day we talked it out right away, after which it was fine again. Honestly, I think it’s a miracle they have been living together 24/7 for three years and only fought once”* (FM4). Indeed, when working and living together in these spaces, some minor conflict is both inevitable and, in practice, manageable.

Even so, some incidents do escalate momentarily. During one observation, a visitor gets into an argument with a visitor-volunteer behind the bar.

A visitor gets into an argument with a volunteer behind the bar, who tells him, “Please shut up – this conversation isn’t about you.” The exchange escalates when the volunteer snaps and adds: “You’re nuts!” The visitor walks off, muttering, “Great job, sir. Great job.” A staff member intervenes and says to the volunteer, “I understand, but you need to calm down – this isn’t helping.” (Observation 12-07-2023)

This shows how an incident of self-regulation between participants can spring into incidental conflict. Participants themselves often link such incidents to the combination of communal living, personalities, and the stressful situation they are in. As one NuNN resident explained: *“We usually sort out small arguments ourselves. But when someone here gets angry, they really explode. It does not happen often, but when it does, it’s usually because something else is going on – something with another person, or something that happened in their private life. At first, that was quite shocking, but now you know who*

has a short fuse" (CP5). Over time, participants learn to anticipate whose stress or background might make them more volatile and adjust their behavior accordingly. Most disputes are still resolved informally within the group, even if occasional outbursts can be intense.

If conflict recurs frequently, it is potentially more disruptive to co-production. An example involves two client council members who serve on three of the same councils and, according to other respondents, are – in somewhat different wording – *"like water and fire"* (EA1; CP22; CP23). Individually, their presence causes no issues, but when they share the same room, meetings can quickly become chaotic. One of the two has a habit of providing the other with blunt, unfiltered commentary during discussions – sometimes escalating into personal attacks and insults, shouting things like: *"What do you even know about that? You're fucking stupid! You cannot come up with anything yourself!"* While this participant's remarks might appear to be driven solely by anger or personal dislike, they also reflect his difficulty in filtering his thoughts and frustrations, which are not formulated diplomatically but do also not emerge out of nowhere. In that sense, the tension and conflict are partly shaped by the participants' problems and personalities.

Together, these examples suggest that incidental conflict is a structural feature of co-production in shared group settings. Just like spontaneous support, such moments also reflect a kind of informal individual peer regulation: participants support, correct, or confront each other.

8.2.2 Peer socialization

In the more cohesive group settings – especially NuNN and NOIZ – participants develop informal collective norms that guide everyday conduct. This type of group regulation differs from individual peer interactions because it reflects a shared group culture. At the same time, it operates outside formal co-producer responsibilities or collective procedures. Instead, it occupies a space in between: grounded in shared expectations and group dynamics that evolve over time. These norms may support cooperation but can also come into tension with how co-production was intended to function.

At NuNN, these informal norms become visible in the way participants socialize one another. *"You can arrive unmotivated and then latch onto others who do motivate you and show you how things are done,* a social worker explains (F4). A volunteer echoes this when describing how the group handles unreliability: *"In every group, you have people who are a little more... well, flexible. Like someone who misses a shift. If it doesn't happen too often, the*

group just picks it up" (CP11). This also shows how group co-production is driven by a collective capacity, rather than being dependent solely on individuals' capacities.

At NOIZ, a staff member describes a similarly close-knit atmosphere: *"They're really doing a great job here. I honestly can't fault a thing. (...) There's this one guy who kind of speaks for everyone. It's turned into a bit of a friend group, really. They look out for each other. Someone's out of cigarettes? 'No problem – here, take one of mine.' Someone's cooking? 'Hey, want some?'"* (F12). Repeated acts of individual support like these gradually form the basis of a broader culture of peer care. A caretaker explains why professional oversight is largely unnecessary: *"With such a small group (...) after some time together, you just assume you look out for each other"* (CP15). In short, what begins with acts of individual help and recognition can also crystallize into a collective culture of mutual support, subtle correction, and low-key protection – informal, but no less consequential for how co-production functions.

In that sense, group culture operates as a motor for co-production: everyday expectations help newcomers find their way, keep shifts running, and ensure that basic rules are upheld even when professionals are not present. These informal norms make it easier to share responsibility in practice, because participants do not act alone but draw on a shared understanding of co-production. In this sense, group dynamics drive co-production.

Yet group cultures can also take different turns. One of NuNN's social workers notes:

"Now it's the opposite. People are unmotivated, and newcomers get brain-washed right away, saying that 'this is how we do it here, these are the rules; stick to them or you're out.' They start with a terrible image of us [social workers], so we're already one-nil down. We must prove all the rumors wrong instead of that they hear that 'you can always come to the office with questions.' Instead, all they're saying is just about money, about what we're skimming. Subsidies we're pocketing and all those stories that go around." (F5)

Such socialization does not just affect how people view co-production or supporting social workers. It also influences how seriously participants take their shifts, how rules are interpreted, and how decisions are made. During one residents' meeting, a participant remarked that the previous group tended to keep accommodating people who ignored the rules: *"and that is hard to change."*

While informal collective norms may foster peer support, they can also lead to a culture that runs counter to intended ideals behind the program. Peer pressure can shape co-production, as well as peer support – especially at NuNN. As one participant explains: “You live with the group, so there’s a kind of group dynamic or peer pressure, however you want to call it. You have a certain standing within the group” (CP4). And while another participant states that *“as long as you behave normally and do your shifts, the group will never turn against you – that simply doesn’t happen,”* (CP6) this does not take away the underlying possibility that can create this pressure.

These undercurrents can feed into more systematic frustrations, around consistent free-riding behavior. One participant, during observations of frontline office work, is overheard complaining to staff during his shift:

This place is a fucking mess. He [points to another participant who just walked in] just got off work, but the rest are worse than pigs. If I don’t do it, no one will,” he says as he grabs the cleaning supplies and moves upstairs again. (Observation January 2023).

In short, informal collective norms play a powerful role in shaping the everyday practice of co-production. They can foster peer support, shared responsibility, and mutual care, but these same norms may also lead to peer pressure, exclusion, or a culture permissive of shirking responsibilities. Thereby, the group cultures that emerge in the programs importantly shape the process of co-production.

8.2.3 Peer discretion

A third mode of self-regulation appears when participants are formally authorized to make individual decisions about others in a program. In these moments, participants exercise discretion: they decide how strictly rules are applied, when exceptions are granted, and whether sanctions or rewards are appropriate. In contrast to the previous two forms of self-regulation, this peer discretion is linked to formally defined roles and tasks rather than emerging solely from informal norms. Sometimes this authority is explicitly designed into the program, as in the self-managed programs, while in other cases it arises more as a by-product of how responsibilities are allocated, as in the visitor-volunteer program or the client council. Peer discretion becomes especially consequential where professional support is limited rather than continuous.

In the visitor-volunteer program, this discretion is limited, yet still visible in certain tasks. During shower duty, a volunteer can decide whether someone can skip the queue; at the laundry duty, another decides if someone can get fresh clothes. Such

small decisions – how long a shower, whether laundry can still be washed – however, have little impact on the social dynamics in the drop-in centers. Although a decision might occasionally result in an altercation or a minor conflict within the drop-in center, these incidents are typically isolated, largely because of prompt professional intervention. It is possible, however, that a heated argument started by a visitor-volunteer could eventually cause trouble between service users outside on the street – once the drop-in center's minor hierarchy is removed (FM1).

In the client council, the scope of discretion is limited but tied to specific roles. Most visibly, the treasurer – chosen from the members of the visitors' and central councils themselves – hands out the meeting allowance after every session (though not at the location councils). That gives this person leverage over who does or does not 'deserve' their fee, or at least an instrument to threaten with. During one meeting a member had to leave after an hour; the treasurer reacted angrily: *"We know these tricks! Next time you'll get nothing. Honestly, unbelievable – you show up for an hour, grab the money, and walk off. Remember that for next time, eh!"*

As already shown earlier, discretion becomes far more consequential in the self-managed programs, where professional support is limited – and, as at NuNN, designed to be consultative. In the absence of (directive) professional support, decisions that are usually reserved for social workers can be taken by participants. At NOIZ, caretakers are sometimes pressed by daily visitors of the drop-in center, for instance, requests to run their laundry at night, and must sometimes make far tougher calls. One caretaker noted that: *"Sometimes it hurts when someone comes to the door asking if they can sleep here. And then I have to say no (...). That's the hardest part"* (CP15). Another caretaker underlined this, reflecting on his key role in accountability processes when users of NOIZ do not abide by the rules: *"You have serious responsibilities. Sometimes you have the guys' lives in your hands. Your decision is very important. You can leave it, keep going, or you can stop him. You give him a warning, a second warning. On the third, he's out of the project. What is going to be next for him? It's your responsibility, you do it"* (CP14).

At NuNN, similar decisions are made during shifts. Participants may tighten or relax house rules depending on the case – letting someone stay inside during the day because of illness or age, or allowing late entry at night. Just as important as what they decide is how they do it: how they speak to others, whether they explain or command, whether they judge or accommodate. At NuNN, guests sometimes express frustration toward staff about certain volunteers who can be quite rude and intimidating, such as when telling guests to leave the building in the morning.

Over time, staff and participants at NuNN have also learned that not all tasks are equally suited to peer discretion. Earlier experiments with delegating highly sensitive responsibilities – such as individual residents' budget management (a service of the shelter many residents use) or keeping the weekend grocery budget in cash with one participant – proved difficult to sustain. Participants struggled to apply consistent standards, and some felt uncomfortable with the responsibility and constant requests from residents for money.

In short, peer discretion relies on personal judgment within an assigned role. This peer discretion allows participants to enforce or interpret rules in practice to other users. Especially in self-managed programs like NuNN and NOIZ, such discretionary power is significant.

8.2.4 Peer governance

Where individual discretion involves isolated decisions made on the spot, peer governance refers to collective decisions made by participants about each other. This form of regulation is both formal and group-based: participants vote, deliberate, and hold authority over roles, responsibilities, and, at times, sanctions. Peer governance only occurs in the client council, and, especially, at NuNN. In these programs, participants regulate key aspects of the group's functioning through formal, collective decision-making about the other service users and/or fellow participants.

In the client councils, peer governance takes the form of structured voting: council members elect who advances to the visitors' or central council, who joins the executive board, or who becomes chair. These roles come with responsibilities, allowances, and – at least for some – status. But beyond these formalities, such moments also provide an opportunity for groups to regulate themselves: to evaluate leadership, question representation, and assert shared norms. The following exchange captures such a moment and reveals how peer governance allows groups to revisit their prevailing norms.

This illustrates how participants use this formal setting to negotiate norms, illustrating how peer governance enables groups to regulate themselves also through formal collective procedures.

Box 8.1 Eight-year rule**Eight-Year Rule**

Freddy, long-standing chairman of the council, hears murmurs about elections and responds sharply: *“Let’s not beat around the bush – if someone wants to replace me, just say so.”*

Simon states that he would like to see a new face.

Rami adds: *“It’s not that we want to lose you, but maybe give someone else a chance.”*

Denzel notes that he wants a president who comes to the drop-in center more often;

Simon observes: *“Chairmen often think they need to lead the conversation, but they should actually listen and give others a voice.”*

Freddy reminds everyone of his accomplishment of having been chair of the Central Council: *“I ruled for eight years! Nobody can take that away from me. It’s just the chairmanship we’re discussing.”*

After a long discussion – elections won’t be held for 6 months – Rami laughingly tries to convince the sitting president that: *“Freddy, I like you, but sometimes, you act like it’s your personal territory, like you’re the decision-maker and dictator!”*

Simon, Rami, and Denzel are regular council members, Freddy is the council president

At NuNN, peer governance is both more consequential and more entangled with everyday life. Participants not only deliberate together; many also live under the same roof, which makes group dynamics permeate people’s everyday life. Moreover, the stakes are high. NuNN-participants vote on matters that directly affect one another in more consequential ways: who gets to stay in the shelter, who becomes a manager, or who faces sanctions after repeated warnings. This also strengthens the potential for peer pressure as described before. The shelter environment at NuNN creates another layer of complexity to this dynamic. Because at NuNN decisions are made by the very people who live together, several acknowledge that they find it challenging to set personal considerations aside in such situations to decide in the common interest.

The group culture discussed previously also leaves a clear mark on these formal mechanisms of self-regulation. One participant recalled his early days at NuNN: *“Back then it was mostly crackheads – people would just put ten euros on the table before the meeting, and then their vote counted. That was the norm”* (CP3). One social worker described how cliques distort peer governance: *“They protect each other. You might hear*

rumors of issues – unless the resident has friends in the clique, then you never hear about it. That's a downside: clique formation. At first you don't notice, but over time you see who holds sway" (F8). These cliques often consist of participants who take their shifts seriously, show up at meetings, and therefore see themselves as carriers of the shelter. Yet their influence can also allow problematic behavior to go unchecked: "They invest more effort in their shifts, so they can expect more from others. They follow the rules better and see themselves as part of NuNN. But at the same time, when someone verbally aggresses others all the time, you think: when will they finally get a warning? But they get away with it because of their group control. It's frustrating" (F8).

This, however, is partly due to the fact that the program's intentions may not always align with the cultural background of participants: *"Where I come from, if you say something, that's snitching. So, with my street mentality, I find it hard to navigate this" (CP4). This dynamic explains why participants commonly complain that "The meeting is just a puppet show" (e.g., CP2; CP10). In such instances, a social worker suspects that "it's also a matter of, 'I know this about you, so if you say this, I'll put that on the table.' I think that's how it works. Life on the streets just continues inside the NuNN, but in a slightly different way" (F7).*

These dynamics can make sanctions uneven: some people get the benefit of the doubt, others do not. However, another social worker also observes that such tendencies have limits: *"Sometimes it's just a matter of waiting. Eventually, it comes to light when the frustration grows large enough – like when someone isn't doing their shifts properly" (F8). When frustrations are large enough, participants generally are also prepared to sanction their friends in times of recurring misbehavior as the next example illustrates.*

This example shows the tension at the heart of NuNN: residents live together, form bonds and friendships, but also must weigh other residents' behavior and interests against the collective interest of the shelter. In the end, this may even include issuing a shelter ban against a friend.

This self-regulatory authority even extends outside formal meetings. If a resident's behavior is seen as unsafe or urgently intolerable, a group of five volunteers can impose an immediate temporary suspension. One participant recalls:

And then there was this guy here. Completely lost his mind. He was mixing all kinds of drugs – using whatever he could get his hands on, staying awake for four days straight, started talking crazier and crazier,

throwing in racist remarks and that kind of crap. At some point, I'd just had enough. It almost got out of control with him too. (...) So one night, we just sent him back to his room, late at night. And I went straight to get a form. Wrote it up right there and then: motion to evict so-and-so, due to inappropriate behavior, harassing others, and racism – something along those lines. And then, right in the middle of the night, I went around to everyone, collecting signatures. You need five or six. That night alone, I got eight. (CP9)

Box 8.2 No payment from Bob

No payment from Bob

Maria reads aloud a list of overdue payments. Bob – a full-time worker and longtime guest – is still behind.

Josep asks what to do. Oliver replies, “He had until this meeting. As far as I’m concerned, he made his choice.”

Olivia suggests checking the bank account; Luke confirms, “No payment.”

Josep messages Bob and notes to the group: “He’s been warned before. I even told him yesterday – it’s basically D-Day for you, mate.”

Noah sighs, “It’s sad if this is how he lets things end. But we all knew this was coming.”

Olivia urges a quick vote. Mason, the chair, asks for a show of hands. One by one, the group agrees: Bob must leave.

Ethan, confused, asks what’s going on. Josep explains: “He works full-time, but hasn’t paid for weeks. Even though he makes enough money in one day to cover rent.”

Even those closest to Bob agree – rules are rules.

Still, Noah proposes a small concession: “Give him one last morning to work, and have a final meal with us.”

Everyone nods. Olivia adds, “That’s a thoughtful compromise.”

Josep, Noah, and Ethan are volunteers. Bob is a guest. Maria, Oliver, Olivia, and Luke are social workers.

The decision, though drastic, followed a predefined procedure and was executed collectively. It shows how the program embeds clear mechanisms for formal peer regulation, even in urgent situations.

And while peer governance is about making decisions, it is also about (re)negotiating collective norms in the shelter. In Box 8.3 below, an excerpt from a NuNN residents' meeting illustrates this, where a conflict between participants sparks discussion and decision-making among both professionals and participants within the program's decision-making venue, and which is ultimately about safety, accountability, and proportionality – a discussion shaped both by the shelter setting, the co-production program, and the participants' vulnerabilities, problems, personalities, norms and values.

Box 8.3 Aura Rules

Aura Rules

During the meeting, much time is spent discussing a conflict between Stan and Brian. According to those involved, the matter has been talked out, but there are claims that physical violence was involved, which would be a clear violation of house rules. Allegedly, Brian either pushed Stan or grabbed him by the throat – accounts differ on this point – and smashed a phone.

Brian tells the group that he is willing to pay for the damage to the phone. He gives his account of the incident. At first, he appears remorseful about the pushing, but as he mentally retraces the events, he visibly gets caught up in his own thoughts, drifting into a debate with himself. While the rest of the group remains seated, he paces the room. Eventually, he stops in front of the mirrors hanging in the lounge area, staring at his own reflection – his eyes wide open. His argument begins to shift: his actions were, in fact, justifiable, and if Stan wants to settle the score, he is welcome to take it to the streets. After all, in a similar situation, Stan might have hit him too – they're mates, and in that context, it would have been fine. Besides, it's not like he attacked him unprovoked: Stan was getting way too close and standing inside his aura. When he finally sits back down at the table, he concludes, *"The rules are outdated. Come on! We all know by now that auras exist. That's why these rules are old-fashioned. Then again, all rules are old-fashioned by definition."* He proposes to introduce new *"aura rules."*

Olivia quickly tempers this idea and shifts the attention to the other present participants' opinions about this situation and what would be an appropriate sanction for Brian's behavior. She explains that violence is normally unacceptable and typically results in suspension. For Brian, this would mean losing his place in the manager apartment and having to move back to the shelter – a severe consequence.

One by one, the participants voice their opinion. Some argue that violence is violence, and the rules should be enforced. Others see it as a resolved dispute

that still warrants punishment, but not so harshly. In the end, the participants vote to give him a warning, but no suspension.

Olivia tells Brian: *“You’re just scraping by...”*

Brian is a manager; Stan is a volunteer; Olivia is a social worker

This episode highlights how peer governance is not only about applying existing rules, but also about possibly reformulating them, collectively discussing their proportionality in concrete situations, and provides an opportunity for re-emphasizing collective rules and norms.

In short, peer governance is a formal, collective mechanism for groups to self-regulate. While this form of self-regulation allows for shared ownership and accountability, it also reveals the difficulty of governing from within: decisions are constantly negotiated under the weight of friendships, frustrations, and everyday life in the shelter.

8.3 Implications: Self-regulation in group co-production

Returning to the quote at the beginning of this chapter – *“I’ve stayed in a shelter before, so this kind of environment doesn’t really surprise me”* (CP2) – the formal mechanisms described here suggest that co-production goes beyond familiar shelter dynamics. Co-production allocates responsibilities and, in essence, power to service users, giving them tools not only to shape their own services, but also to immediately shape those of others. In doing so, it fundamentally reconfigures relations between service users.

The first two informal mechanisms of self-regulation – spontaneous support, incidental conflict, and informal peer culture – are likely present in most homelessness services or even in all group-based settings. Shelters commonly exhibit frequent frustrations and conflicts alongside moments of solidarity and mutual support. Similarly, many organizations have participation structures – such as client councils – through which (former) service users can advise on local or central policy. What distinguishes some of the programs studied here are the more far-reaching mechanisms of peer discretion and peer governance. Participants in these settings interpret rules, resolve conflicts, and take urgent decisions when things go wrong – tasks that in most services remain firmly in professional hands. In the self-managed programs, this is especially visible and also a practical necessity: when professional support is deliberately limited, such decisions must be taken from within the group.

This raises questions about the implications for participants and service users operating in such settings. For those who hold peer power, the effects are ambivalent. On the one hand, peer discretion and peer governance can foster the development of skills, confidence, and a sense of responsibility. Participants learn to weigh information, articulate arguments, and make decisions that matter. Caretakers and volunteers in NOIZ and NuNN describe how they grow into roles that resemble those of frontline workers: setting boundaries, making decisions about access and sanctions, and weighing rules and consequences.

On the other hand, having to wield power over others exposes them to pressure and moral strain. Participants with formal roles may be approached or pressured by others to “get things done” for them – for instance, letting someone shower out of turn, granting extra laundry, or bending rules around access. In more consequential situations, they face moral dilemmas and burdens typically associated with frontline work: deciding whether to evict someone, when to give a final warning, or how strictly to apply rules when a person is clearly struggling. As several caretakers at NOIZ and volunteers at NuNN indicate, these responsibilities can feel heavy and are not easily shrugged off at the end of a shift (e.g., CP14, CP15).

For those who are at the receiving end of peer decisions – sometimes the same people, at different moments – the implications are similarly double-edged. Peer discretion and peer governance can bring decisions closer to the lived realities of participants. Because decisions are made by service users themselves, they may be more attuned to what is feasible, fair, or humane in context. The decisions around Bob and Brian (Box 8.2 and Box 8.3), for instance, show how participants take into account relationships, histories, and practical consequences when weighing sanctions, while also considering the collective longer-term interest of the shelter. At their best, these mechanisms can therefore render shelter rules more responsive to user needs and wishes.

At the same time, such formal mechanisms of groups to self-regulate can intensify peer pressure and reproduce inequalities within the group. Peer governance at NuNN sometimes appears to be shaped by clique loyalties, reputations, or informal street codes. Participants with status in the group may be protected, while others are sanctioned more quickly. Personal histories, past and current debts, and mutual secrets can all enter into decisions in ways that would be considered problematic in more conventional professional practice. Earlier episodes at NuNN – such as buying influence in meetings by literally putting money on the table to secure a vote – illustrate how far such dynamics can go.

Seen from this perspective, co-production in these programs is not only about involving vulnerable citizens, but also about creating groups and regulating them. Where professional support is consultative and especially when it is deliberately kept at a distance, such mechanisms are almost unavoidable: someone must interpret rules and take decisions when things escalate. At the same time, they ensure that local knowledge and lived experience are brought into decision-making in ways that would be hard to replicate in purely professional services.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, group dynamics are not merely a backdrop to co-production, but a driving force – shaped by group size, stability, and the vulnerabilities of those involved, as well as by the formal mechanisms embedded in the programs to regulate them. Smaller and more stable groups tend to foster stronger interpersonal bonds and seem easier to self-regulate, while larger or more volatile groups may be more susceptible to conflict, free-riding, or fragmentation. The presence of chronic stress, addiction, or aggression can further strain group relations.

Group dynamics have consequences for how co-production unfolds in practice and carry dual potential. On the one hand, they can drive co-production and enable mutual support, shared responsibility, and a sense of ownership. On the other hand, they can derail it through peer pressure, exclusion, or recurring conflict. They may open space for trust and commitment, but just as easily cultivate fear, silence, or informal hierarchies.

To navigate these tensions, groups regulate themselves in various ways. Informally, participants everywhere engage in individual and collective forms of self-regulation. Formally, some programs assign participants discretionary authority, or facilitate peer governance through collective decisions about roles, rules, and sanctions. These forms of regulation reflect attempts to regulate group dynamics through formal collective means.

Ultimately, this chapter has argued that co-production is not just about sharing tasks and decision-making; it is equally about negotiating relationships, norms, and responsibilities within groups. Co-production is shaped by, and in turn reshapes, the social dynamics between service users. This raises a next question: how do frontline professionals operate in such an environment? That is the focus of the following chapter.



Chapter 9.

Frontline dynamics in co-production

The previous chapter argued that group dynamics and the mechanisms of self-regulation are central to how co-production unfolds in practice. It also showed that these internal dynamics carry a dual potential. What emerged just as well, however, is that these group dynamics do not operate in isolation. While participant groups self-regulate to some extent, the actions of the professional supporters remain highly influential.¹⁹ Professionals may structure the design of programs, guide processes of co-production, and intervene where deemed necessary.

Where the previous chapter focused on the internal dynamics of participant groups, this chapter completes the analysis of the process of co-production by focusing on the interplay between the professionals and the participants. More specifically, this chapter addresses two interrelated questions:

1. *What mechanisms do frontline workers employ to steer the process of co-production?*
2. *What challenges arise in supporting co-production?*

To answer these questions, the chapter begins by identifying three key mechanisms of professional support: *structuring* the program, *guiding* participant behavior, and *intervening* when necessary. It then explores four recurring challenges faced by frontline workers: diverging interests and values, uncertainty and dependence, and the tension between responsibility and accountability.

9.1 Mechanisms of professional support: Structuring, guiding, and intervening

In the previous chapter, we dealt with ways in which groups self-regulate – but we study co-production, not complete self-organization. This means that professionals are essential, too, in these processes. Although co-production efforts often aim to empower participants, latent roles and hierarchies persist; ultimately, the professionals and organizations are the stable factors within these initiatives and remain accountable to the organizational environment.

Professionals have several ways to guide the dynamics in the program. Throughout the fieldwork, three main types of professional involvement appear in supporting co-production, relating to (1) structuring what the co-production program entails, (2) normatively guiding participants' actions in the program, and (3) intervening.

^{19.} As noted in Chapter 4, the term *professional* refers to the organizational support role (usually paid) rather than the participant role. In the client council, co-production is also supported by external advisors who may serve in voluntary roles; when I refer to them, I state this explicitly.

9.1.1 Structuring co-production

First, professionals guide the dynamics of co-production by setting and guarding the formal contours of co-production, as extensively discussed in the previous chapters, such as the tasks, roles, selection criteria, and decision-making procedures within the program. This mechanism is the most visible in the visitor-volunteer and NOIZ programs, where the organization decides which roles exist, which standards volunteers or caretakers must meet, and which sanctions to apply when participants fail to meet expectations. In short, the professionals have an important role in devising the rules of the game and in selecting its participants. Ultimately, the organization determines what co-production entails and who participates. This gives the organization relatively straightforward mechanisms to regulate participant group dynamics in co-production.

While less obvious, at NuNN the social workers also play an important role in shaping what the fundamental program structure entails in practice. The social workers guard the program's structure as it emerged in the foundational years of the shelter and determine which rules are appropriate for the shelter, and heavily influence participants to keep it this way. They keep the weekly residents' meeting on the calendar, uphold the weekly shifts system, are attentive to the house rules that are made, and protect the program's procedures. As a social worker answered, when asked if residents could vote to abolish the residents' meeting, *"In theory, yes – but then we'd say, 'that's the end of self-management,' because things would go haywire. Or I'd say, 'that's fine, but then I'll be gone as well'"* (F6). Similarly, about the core house rules that have remained remarkably consistent throughout the year, another social worker notes that: *"The rules are basically the same as when I started here. Only in nuance they are sometimes changed – and that is also what the residents' meeting is for"* (F2). At times, this also means slowing down groups that want to tighten the regime. As one social worker explains, part of their role is to protect the basic culture of self-management by preventing an inflation of rules: *"Occasionally, you get a group that wants more and more rules, everything stricter. Then we have to say: hold on. We once agreed that all house rules should fit on a single A4 in a normal font – that's important for self-management. It's easy to add rules, but taking them off again is a different story, so instead of tightening everything, we ask why things are not going well right now"* (SW9). In other words, while the rules can be altered, the professionals ultimately guard the fundamental program structure.

At DRG's client council, this dynamic is less pronounced, as the council and the organization jointly draft a participation agreement that must be approved by both parties. Still, the organization takes the initiative in developing its content.

9.1.2 Guiding co-production

Beyond setting the formal contours of co-production, professionals can also shape the dynamics of co-production by guiding how co-production ought to occur by voicing espoused norms, values, and expectations. This mechanism is the most noticeable in frontline work at NuNN's residents' meetings. Frontline workers use a handful of phrases as anchors for the shelter's espoused identity and ideals. *"The street is sacred"* points to the necessity to act as good neighbors in the shelter's immediate environment; *"everyone deserves a chance"* points to the espoused identity of NuNN as a place where people – no matter where they are from or what they did in the past – can build up their lives again. *"The residents' meeting is the heart of self-management"* signals that collective decisions should be based on transparent deliberation. Finally, *"The group decides"* reminds both social workers and residents that self-management creates the right and responsibility for participants to make decisions. These are not hollow phrases but guide professionals in their daily work. As a social worker answers the question on how he would react when a group would be tougher on service users than the social workers preferred, he states: *"I'd say that 'well, you [as a group] can think that, but the vision of NuNN is that everyone deserves a chance'"* (F2). An example of how social workers may do this, is shown in Box 9.1 below.

Box 9.1 Hold on

Hold on

Another issue emerges about a guest who keeps taking new bedding and is behind on his payments. Several participants express their frustration, insisting he should pay and noting his vague promises: he told one social worker he would pay last Monday and two others that he would pay this upcoming Monday.

Ethan suggests that the guest should pay by Friday or leave the shelter.

George, an intern, responds that this seems like a harsh penalty.

Sophia adds, 'Hold on, with Tom you covered for him for months, and now someone else misses a payment once, and you want to kick him out?'

Jackson points out that Tom was reliable, but this guest is always complaining.

Noah confirms this.

Sophia argues that reliability shouldn't be the issue; she understands being more lenient with some than others, but finds the disparity too extreme and unacceptable.

Noah explains that the culture of the past group was to always accommodate people, like with Tom, or Jack 'who turned a manager apartment into a brothel – twice.'

Olivia summarizes, 'There are two proposals: Noah says Friday, Mason says Monday.'

Mason argues, 'I think he just gets paid on Monday.'

Emily repeats her point to Noah: 'When I see how you handled Tom, you're being really tough on this guy, and I don't think it's fair.'

Mason proposes giving the guest until Monday. Ali insists on Friday. Mac agrees with Monday. Noah then goes along with Monday, adding, 'It's not that I'm covering for Tom, but the previous group did. And that's hard to change. Exactly what you [Emily] said: you also form bonds with people, you know.'

Emily agrees, 'That's human, but we also need to be critical.'

Ethan, Noah, Tom, and Mason are task volunteers; George, Sophia, and Olivia are social workers; Jack is a former participant who has been temporarily banned from the shelter.

This episode illustrates how frontline workers slow down demands for harsher sanctions and keep bringing the discussion back to values such as fairness, proportionality, and consistency with NuNN's broader vision, without simply overruling the group.

At the visitor-volunteer program, too, much of the frontline work in supporting visitor-volunteers consists of voicing (normative) expectations, for instance about how they should (and should not) address other visitors of the drop-in centers. Likewise, within the client council – both professional (external) supporters and organizational representatives – voice normative expectations from council members. They occasionally remind members that they are not speaking only for themselves, but for the entire user base – “*you're here to represent the visitors.*” Moreover, an external advisor – who owes his position to the council itself – states that he will take a more assertive role “*when the quality of participation is at risk,*” pointing to the professional's actions to shape how participation ought to occur (EA1).

At NOIZ, this mechanism to support co-production is less visible in the data, as it mainly occurs through informal, day-to-day communication between staff and participants. But it is certainly present. Several staff members and location managers indicate that they not only communicate the rules but also their spirit; what is – or is not – ‘the intended way’ of doing things. In doing so, they convey how co-production ought to take place, beyond what is written on paper.

9.1.3 Intervention

Finally, professionals wield the (implicit) authority of professionals to override participant decisions, enforce rules, or involve outside authorities when core norms or safety are at stake. This creates a clear dependency of service users on staff and an enduring power imbalance. In the visitor-volunteer program this is most obvious: staff can instantly instruct visitor-volunteers or correct their behavior whenever it crosses a line. They decide who may participate and who is barred from future shifts – ultimately controlling both entry and exit. At NOIZ, location managers likewise determine what counts as acceptable caretaker behavior; although staff are absent at night, caretakers must be aware that their position is contingent on the ongoing support of the drop-in center's professional staff. The structures of visitor-volunteer and NOIZ programs clearly give professionals the power to intervene.

Even at NuNN, social workers have the ultimate authority to intervene when they deem it necessary – although they can be reluctant to do so and will not unless other options have proven ineffective. The following quote illustrates the reaction of a social worker during a residents' meeting after it came to light that one man stole a bike at the local construction site where he works and stashed it in the shelter:

Oliver addresses the participant who stole the bike: *“And, yeah, I know you say [name of the man's employer] asked you to do it, but that's not how it works. NuNN is not a den of thieves. And you should actually get a warning for this. Well, you can suggest it yourself.”*

The participant in question makes his apologies to the group and suggests that the group sanctions him for bringing in a stolen bike with a warning. Everyone agrees. The social worker compliments the participant: *“I respect that.”*

This example illustrates that the people involved know that it is not an option that one of the fundamental norms – ‘the street is sacred’ – would not be enforced in this case. As a participant noted, *“Look, it is self-management, but we also all know that when users of NuNN cross certain boundaries, then the organization or the office has a say. (...) And I'm completely fine with that – I actually think it's normal because otherwise, things would completely fall apart. But because of that (...), what you're doing ends up being somewhat fictional”* (CP10).

This shows that frontline workers have the potential to intervene, confirming the ultimate authority of professional staff. This is not to say that participants are without power in the process but it *does* mean that the daily interactions between participants

and professionals occur in the shadow of professional authority, which also shapes the dynamics. Participants draw on their own resources – their roles embedded in the program structure, informal coalitions, or even information-asymmetries – to shape decisions, just as professionals do.

These three mechanisms of support – structuring, guiding, and intervening – illustrate how professionals shape the processes of co-production. While their use of these forms differs, in all cases, professionals play a key role in stabilizing the program, upholding its boundaries, and reinforcing underlying (intended) values.

9.2 Frontline challenges in supporting co-production

While frontline workers employ various mechanisms to guide the dynamics of co-production, this does not alter the fundamental shift it creates in the frontline environment. Co-production transfers responsibilities and tasks – traditionally held by professional staff – to groups of service users. This shift affects not only relationships between participants (as discussed in the previous chapter) but also transforms the conditions under which frontline professionals operate.

Four core challenges arise from this transformed frontline environment. These challenges do not appear equally across all programs, but they reflect recurring patterns in co-production:

1. Navigating shifting relationships between co-producers and staff
2. Diverging interests, values, and capacities
3. Dependence and uncertainty
4. Responsibility and accountability

In the contexts under study, this transformation takes place with groups that are vulnerable – participants often depend on the services they help run, while living with stress, addiction, psychiatric or cognitive challenges, limited resources, and sometimes limited rights. This vulnerability acts as a structural backdrop that shapes this frontline environment and amplifies the frontline challenges that arise in co-production.

9.2.1 Navigating shifting relationships between co-producers and staff

A first challenge that can arise in co-production relates to a blurring of boundaries between professionals and clients, between home and work, and between formal and informal responsibilities. This unclarity can create friction for both professionals

and co-producers, particularly when participants fulfill multiple roles within the same space.

One of the places where such tensions emerge is in interactions between co-producing participants and other service users. As one respondent described: *“Visitor-volunteers often still have that sharp edge to them. They speak up, confront others about things – even though it’s not really their job to do so. And the way they do it... it creates problems between people outside the center, too”* (FM1). These informal assertions of authority can disrupt peer relations and fuel conflict, especially when other users perceive these participants as overstepping boundaries.

It can also lead to strain between participants and professional staff. This became especially pronounced at DRG, when caretakers in NOIZ programs also acted as visitor-volunteers at the same drop-in center. Being present day and night, they started feeling “too at home,” as one location manager put it, leading them to take over tasks from professionals and assert themselves as informal authority figures. Another location manager reflected on the same tension: *“For caretakers, it’s important that they eventually leave. Otherwise, the drop-in center becomes their home, and our daily activities start to feel like an intrusion. That can create tension. What I focus on most is to lure them away from the drop-in center sometimes. They’re often too involved: they see too much, get annoyed by things that happen during the day, even though those aren’t really their concern”* (FM5).

In some cases, co-production can lead to friction in team dynamics. In one case, a caretaker who was also active as a volunteer regularly overslept, which led to conflicts with the daytime team. *“He wasn’t doing well mentally,”* a location manager noted. *“For me, the hardest part is keeping the relationship between him and the rest of the team healthy”* (FM5). As a result, some locations implemented clearer boundaries; for example, no longer allowing caretakers to volunteer at their own drop-in center to avoid them becoming, in the words of one location manager, *“lords of the house”* (FM1).

The blurring of lines between professionals and co-producers can even lead to a sense of unfairness among participants – especially those without legal status in the Netherlands with few opportunities to grow beyond as co-producer. One of them remarked: *“After a while, you start wondering: you’re doing the same as the daytime staff, but you only get seven euros for a shift”* (CP20). At the same time, there are no legal options to formally employ them as professional staff. The general sentiment among both staff and co-producers in these cases is therefore ambivalent: on the one hand, participation in NOIZ and visitor-volunteering offered access to shelter and a small

income, as well as structure and meaning that would otherwise be unavailable. On the other hand, when this situation persists over time, it often led to a blurring of boundaries that at times bordered on exploitation. A location manager notes that: *“One of the caretakers is quite dependent on us. He receives about sixty-five euros a week – for his daytime activities here and for his caretaker role. (...) So yes, he depends on us, which doesn’t make it any easier. And at the same time, this is his home. He’s glad to be here, of course, but that dependence is also uncomfortable”* (FM5).

This shows how this challenge is amplified by structural causes that make people vulnerable, in this case with groups with limited legal rights. While participation offers structure, meaning, and a sense of belonging, it can increase the risk of tension with both staff and other service users over time.

9.2.2 Diverging interests and values

The second central challenge is about the potential of diverging interests, norms, and values between participants’ and the frontline workers or wider organization. To be clear, this divergence is exactly why co-production matters: if service users’ perspectives and priorities simply mirrored professional ones, involving them in co-production would be less urgent. Yet these differences also create potential frontline challenges: how to weigh these differences against one another, how to align them? What to do when participants’ actions and decisions run against what a frontline worker deems needed. Two interwoven dimensions lie at the heart of this challenge: interests, norms, and values. While they cannot be strictly separated, the next part discusses these one by one.

Conflicting interests

Co-production does not automatically align everyone’s interests: interests between participants may differ, as well as those of the service user groups from the frontline workers or the organization. Differences may arise due to a differing time horizon – where participants may focus on immediate decisions, frontline workers are tasked with safeguarding its longer-term consequences, or simply due to differing roles.

One clear example of how short-term group interests can clash with longer-term collective goals of an organization comes from NuNN. As a part of its self-management model, the manager apartments embody a central incentive for committed participation – and after two years of successful managership, participants can earn the right to independent housing, facilitated by a housing association. This incentive is meant to reward personal growth and committed contribution to the shelter. However, one social worker raised concerns that the mechanism was not always used

as intended. Occasionally, participants nominate someone for the managership not to stimulate their growth, but because the volunteer group would like to remove him from the shelter: *“The idea is that someone becomes a manager because he deserves it. But now, sometimes people are chosen because the group is simply fed up with them. They think: if we vote him into a position as manager, we’re rid of him. (...) The problem is: you don’t want that same group deciding who gets to move into a social-housing flat. If it goes wrong a few times, we risk losing the agreement. There are conditions attached”* (F4).

This example illustrates how co-production can enable participants to make real decisions – but not always for the reasons staff hope. The wishes and interests of participants may clash with those of professionals. In practice, participants may prioritize more direct, pragmatic group goals rather than the goals reflecting the organizational rationale for co-production. Meanwhile, frontline workers must weigh such group dynamics against longer-term concerns of the organization: maintaining credibility among partners and fulfilling its public tasks.

A second example of diverging interests comes from DRG’s client council, where participants and staff held a series of discussions around a proposed sustainability measure. As part of its organizational strategy, DRG aimed to reduce its CO₂ emissions. A substantial share of that footprint came from the daily meals served in the drop-in centers – particularly from the meat. Many staff also supported reducing meat consumption for environmental reasons and out of ethical conviction. At the same time, this ran counter to the wishes of many visitors who simply eat meat. In the end, a broadly supported compromise was reached to establish one vegetarian day per week in each drop-in center. In this case, the differences were bridged, but it does not alter the fact that interests may diverge.

Diverging norms and values

Beyond interests, divergence may also occur in norms and values between participants and professionals. This may stem from diverging backgrounds, e.g., differences in national cultures, or what some described as a street mentality, shaped by life on the margins. But such divergence may also result from the fact that co-producers are not bound by professional standards. As with conflicting interests, this tension is inherent to co-production and has both advantages and drawbacks.

On the one hand, differing values may allow decisions or actions by co-producers to resonate more strongly than if they had been carried out by professionals. A staff member at a drop-in center describes how one caretaker handles behavioral boundaries: *“Look, our caretaker sometimes applies rules in ways we [staff] could never get*

away with. If someone's out of line, she'll still let them in, but won't offer the extra services she gives to others. And she'll just say it straight: 'I don't like your face today.' People get the message – and it works. Most of them behave because of it” (F10). A NuNN social worker observed something similar: *“They can be surprisingly hard on each other. Even though they're all in the same boat, they hand out serious punishments or warnings without much hesitation. But it works” (F8).* In short, because co-producers are not bound by professional standards, and because their values often align more closely with other service users, their approach can sometimes be more effective.

At times, this divergence goes beyond differences in tone or emphasis, and directly conflicts with the organization's core values, such as inclusion. One NuNN volunteer reflected on this tension with striking honesty: *“As a task volunteer, I find it hard to stay neutral. I think most of us go by gut feeling. And really, that means you're no longer treating people fairly. I mean – no offence – but we've had three or four Somali men here, and each time it went badly. So when the next Somali applies, I already suspect him as a problem. That's bad, I know. But it's just how I feel” (CP10).*

These examples illustrate a central challenge within co-production: the very differences that make user involvement meaningful – diverging interests, values, and role expectations – can also complicate its practice. When service users are given real responsibilities, their decisions may at times resonate more strongly with their peers or reflect everyday priorities that professionals might overlook. In other cases, those same decisions may feel uncomfortable or problematic – raising concerns about fairness, consistency, or inclusion. Rather than being incidental, such tensions appear as a recurring feature in co-production: both a source of strength and a potential fault line.

9.2.3 Dependence and uncertainty

Sharing power and responsibility with service users inevitably introduces a form of dependence in the frontline environment. As co-producers gain room to act and decide, frontline staff become reliant – though to varying degrees – on participants' actions, interpretations, and judgments. That dependence, in turn, can create uncertainty: about what happens in practice, how decisions are made, or whether issues are recognized and addressed in time.

In some contexts, this uncertainty is relatively limited. In the visitor-volunteer program, staff remain closely involved, and the tasks assigned are small in scope. In client councils, uncertainty is often procedural: a veto or strong opposition may delay decision-making or complicate organizational plans, but it rarely disrupts day-to-

day operations. The risks, therefore, remain manageable – more a source of potential frustration than of operational disruption.

At the same time, involving service users can also help reduce uncertainty, as they raise concerns or needs before frontline staff even notice them. As DRG's director notes: *"It means you get feedback directly from service users on what's already in place. Even if they bring up uncomfortable things – like, 'Why are you doing more for Ukrainians than for us?' – it forces you to explain and justify your actions. That doesn't mean you'll stop doing it, but at least you'll have heard it. And without a council, you wouldn't get that kind of feedback in such a structured way"* (M4).

But in self-managed programs like NuNN or NOIZ, the stakes are higher. Frontline workers operate at a distance: they are not present at night or during weekends. This makes staff dependent on participants to do the work, and limits their control due to an ongoing information asymmetry. At NuNN, this is further amplified by the fact that, at least in theory, all operational decision-making power lies in the hands of the participants.

This creates significant uncertainty in the delivery of services – especially in times when, as described in the previous chapter, a culture of silence takes hold among a participant group. As one NuNN social worker put it: *"A lot of lying goes on, I think. Things get withheld, and that means you never really have the full picture. Sometimes you just wonder – are they making the right call, or twisting the story so they come out looking better?"* (F8). The same applies to NOIZ, where the program manager reflects on what it means to make decisions to evict residents as a form of sanction: *"Even when it's clear what happened, it still feels difficult to put someone back out on the street. But the hardest part is when there's some doubt or disagreement about what actually went down. That's the part I find most troubling. Still, I can't think of a concrete case that's kept me up at night"* (F16).

These examples show how sharing power and responsibility through co-production introduces a source of dependence and uncertainty for frontline workers. This plays out against a more general backdrop of uncertainty that is characteristic of homeless shelters: staff and residents rarely know exactly who enters the shelter, what kinds of needs or risks they bring, or how their behavior may unfold over time. At NuNN, for instance, during fieldwork, a new guest entered the shelter directly from a seclusion cell in a penitentiary institution that focuses on offenders with highly complex behavioral or psychiatric needs. The only information available to staff was that he had recently received a long-acting psychiatric medication, a sign that something serious was at stake without clarity about when or how problems might surface.

For the social workers, this created a diffuse sense of risk: at what point might this translate into actual disruptive behavior? And how should they prepare the group for this?

Seen together, these examples show how sharing power and responsibility through co-production – especially when norms, values, and interests may diverge – introduces a source of dependence and uncertainty for frontline workers, added to the regular uncertainties of their work. At the same time, it is important to note that co-production can also help *reduce* uncertainty in other ways (Fledderus, Brandsen, and Honingh 2015). By giving service users real influence and responsibilities, organizations may gain a clearer understanding of their needs and preferences.

9.2.4 Responsibility and accountability

The final central challenge relates to tensions between internal responsibility and external accountability. Nowhere do the tensions of co-production become more pronounced than in NuNN's self-management model, where participants have the primary authority over decisions and actions that directly affect the daily functioning of the shelter. As one social worker explains: *"Self-management is about having a say. If you start giving that up, you have to ask what you're really doing. Then you're still co-creating or consulting, but that is something fundamentally different."* In this view, self-management ends *"when people from the target group – those actually running the shelter – have no full say over the matters that affect them"* (F1).

Yet this internal logic potentially stands in sharp contrast to the external demands of accountability. Frontline workers and their organization remain accountable to the municipality and partner organizations for outcomes they may neither support nor formally control. In practice, this means having to explain or defend decisions made by others – sometimes contrary to their own judgement, values, or without full knowledge of the group's rationale.

The following example in Box 9.2 illustrates the full weight of this tension. It offers a personal reflection from a frontline worker on a prolonged period of conflict within the shelter, during which group decisions clashed with staff values and the organizational mission they are tasked with upholding.

Box 9.2 What am I doing here?**What am I doing here?**

“In regular organizations, you just have very clear protocols and rules. And with us, you do have rules but there aren’t fixed consequences. So, and also with certain behaviors that people find bothersome, they can come up with their own sanctions. And indeed, that’s not set in stone. And we might have a very different view of it than the group, which is increasingly coming to the fore right now.

And that’s the difficult part. Because that’s also when you start to think at some point: what am I doing here? I’m part of something, but I can no longer justify it to myself. And all the while, I didn’t even make that choice; yet, you must go along with it. In the winter shelter meetings [weekly meetings in the local policy field with other homeless service providers], I really struggled with this whole self-management thing. I thought: *“Now I have to keep advocating for self-management, even though I cannot justify how self-management is currently being implemented by the group.”* So, then, you’re in such a dilemma. Like, okay, am I now, in my feeling, kind of lying. And pretending like everything is going so well. Just to make it appear to the outside world like self-management is something fantastic. That has been running for 28 years. And how great is that? While you notice. That at times – at *this time* – it just doesn’t work. But then you still act toward others as if it does work. And that doesn’t feel right. (. . .)

Last year, I pretended all was well in these meetings and defended all group decisions, but right now there’s stuff happening – I cannot justify it to myself. What on earth am I doing? (. . .) Because that is what’s happening right now: they [the group] literally make people sleep on the street, even though we have beds vacant. Because they do not want them in; and say, *“we’re full.”* And vulnerable guests, who already have trouble speaking up, are getting sanctioned and banned, one by one – for reasons we don’t think they should be sanctioned” (F5).

This example lays bare that co-production introduces uncertainty and opens the potential for participants to act in conflict with professionals’ convictions. Yet while the internal logic of co-production may prioritize user autonomy, the outer world continues to hold professionals answerable. As this account shows, misalignment can place frontline workers in untenable positions, leading to a sense of alienation.

9.3 An extreme illustration: The limits of co-production

To illustrate how all these group and frontline dynamics tie in together, this chapter ends with an extended example that happened over a few months at NuNN. This illustration is taken, not because it is representative of co-production in these settings generally, but *because* it is an extreme episode within an already unusual case of co-production. Precisely because of this, it acts as a stress test: it makes visible the tensions and challenges that are inherent to co-production – in terms of group self-regulation and professional support – but that usually remain manageable or largely invisible in everyday practice. Thereby, it serves as an example of conditions under which self-management falters.

The story follows Tyrell, a new guest whose arrival initially seems promising but gradually exposes the limits of the group's capacity to self-regulate and professional support. Over the course of a few weeks, his behavior destabilizes the group and forces staff to confront how self-management can stretch when it no longer works as intended and safety is under pressure.

Arrival and active contribution

The story begins when Tyrell enters NuNN as a guest. He has just come out of detention and has no housing. His arrival immediately brings the complex reality of the target group to the surface: alongside his need for shelter, he brings a history of aggression and a mild intellectual disability into the group.

He is admitted as a guest and, after about two weeks, he is selected to do a trial week as a volunteer. While this seems like a successful integration on the surface, a social worker later reflects that this promotion was driven by an incentive that shows how participants' interests do not always align with the collective interest of a program:

In the beginning, it went reasonably well, but you noticed quickly that he kicks off very easily. (...) The house rules were more of an indication to him than a hard rule. For example, leaving the shelter at 10 AM, he created so much resistance around that. You started to notice that people just let it slide, that they accepted it, while normally they really wouldn't do that. (...) And I think that, out of convenience, he was made a volunteer. Like: "Okay, if he is a volunteer, we don't have to confront him anymore about leaving, because then he has the privilege to stay inside." So, in a relatively short period, he became a task volunteer, whereas normally weeks would go by before that happens. (F5)

The first meetings: Frustration and escalation

In the first meeting, Tyrell states, enthusiastically, that he had already helped out a few times in the past week and that he enjoys being able to contribute. During his first residents' meeting, however, tensions begin to surface. He sits demonstratively in the lounge area instead of at the tables where the discussion is happening. At one point, he calls out: *"I'm not saying anything about anyone."* Later on, though, he does express his frustration: *"People cook lazy."*

Brian, who often cooks, snaps back: *"Without us, this place would've fallen apart a long time ago!"* Accusations fly back and forth. Voices are raised. After a while, Tyrell storms out, shouting: *"Come outside, then!"* Eventually, the situation calms down, and the meeting ensues.

The following week, during the meeting, Tyrell says that the volunteers who live in the shelter should be the ones cooking, instead of the managers who live outside of the shelter and often drop the ball. To clarify, and referring to last week's argument, social worker Luke asks whether that also includes Brian – a manager who cooks often, and is one of the more committed participants.

Instead of answering, Tyrell lashes out to Luke: *"You think you're better than me? This is a puppet show. You're all kissing each other's asses – I'm not part of that. I'm a man. Come over here; you wouldn't talk to me like that outside. I'd do time for you!"*

In this outburst, the incompatibility of Tyrell's norms with those of NuNN becomes visible. Tyrell operates with a 'street-mentality' – based on hierarchy due to physical strength and intimidation – which conflicts with the norms where decisions are supposed to be made collectively and transparently in the residents' meeting. Similarly, he did not accept hierarchy from all social workers: *"He also refused to take anything from women. (...) Female staff could say whatever they wanted – he simply didn't accept it"* (F5).

In reaction to Tyrell's threats, Luke tells the group it's outrageous if this kind of behavior goes unpunished – but everyone stays silent. As a social worker later observed: *"There was a real climate of fear. People played along with him – almost strategically – because keeping him as a 'friend' felt like the safest option. One evening he completely went off at me in the living room, in front of everyone. And nobody – literally nobody – stepped in or said, 'Hey, calm down.' That was the moment I realized: this isn't okay. I don't feel supported by the group at all"* (F5).

After the meeting, Tyrell walks into the office, where social workers Luke and George are. There's a heated exchange, but the two social workers manage to calm things down.

Tyrell's frustration seems rooted in the fact that the food situation is a mess and shifts are not being covered. Luke and George assure him that they share his frustration, but that this is not the way to deal with it. Instead, they try to persuade him that the meeting is *exactly* the place to raise those concerns in NuNN in order to improve things. After a while, the tone shifts – the efforts by the social workers to guide Tyrell in how self-management works and explanation how it is structured might seem effective.

In terms of the typology developed in Chapter 8, this phase shows how informal collective norms drift from peer socialization toward peer pressure: instead of offering mutual support and subtle correction, participants 'play along' to avoid becoming targets themselves. At the same time, the formal collective mechanism of peer governance – the residents' meeting – effectively stalls. Meanwhile, the social workers try to repair this situation by on the one hand, appealing to the group to take their responsibilities seriously, and simultaneously, by aiming to convince Tyrell of how self-management ought to work.

Escalation and crisis

Despite last week's seemingly established mutual understanding, things blow up again in the following meeting. At first, Tyrell keeps to himself on the couch at the edge of the living room. But partway through the meeting, he suddenly starts shouting from across the room – cursing people out because Mason was not present during his shifts (due to a funeral), yet now he is chairing the meeting.

Noah and Brian, as well as the social workers, try to reason with him. It does not register. Tyrell keeps yelling: *"If y'all want me gone, you're going to have to beat me out of here!"* When staff try to calm things down, Tyrell continues: *"But if I go, I'm going out with a bang – I swear on my brother!"*, pointing two fingers toward the sky. What follows is a torrent of threats and curses, going on for several minutes. Eventually, a few people say, *"Come on, let's move on,"* and the meeting is wrapped up quickly.

After the meeting, the social workers admit they have no clue how to deal with the situation. One says: *"It's clear this can't go on like this (...) People need to feel safe here – that's the least we can provide. And if that's no longer possible... This is supposed to be their home."* This creates a paralyzing dilemma for the professionals: they are responsible

for safety but dependent on a group that is too afraid to act. Police intervention seems premature as no physical violence has occurred yet. Staff fear that *“for all we know, they’ll just drop him right back off at our doorstep.”* They discuss potential external solutions with external service organizations, such as probation services or the municipality.

The confrontation

Despite these hopes, Tyrell is again present at the following meeting – and social worker Luke is not.

Oliver begins by bringing up the issue of safety. He explains Luke is not here because of an incident with Tyrell the week before. Tyrell pushes back, claiming he only reacts when treated badly and that *“you’re the ones with power here.”*

Oliver corrects him, reminding him of the structure of self-management: *“No, the decisions are made here – but it is only possible if things are put on the table.”* He recounts how Luke had confronted Tyrell over the aggressive way he had spoken to another guest. In response, Tyrell became verbally aggressive, and later approached Luke at his desk, slammed his fist next to him on the counter, and yelled at him from close range. Oliver remarks to the group that Luke has worked at NuNN for ten years, and this was the first time he said he felt unsafe.

Tyrell shrugs this off, again noting that, *“Then he shouldn’t be working here. We’re people from the streets.”*

Oliver also expresses disappointment that none of the volunteers came down to help de-escalate. Safety, he says, is something that is built together. Tyrell insists they are making it into a bigger deal because it involved him, and says that if people want to address him, they should do so as equals – not like a child.

At that point, Sophia interrupts, saying she’s already spent hours trying to talk with him about this. Tyrell snaps at her: *“That’s what I mean. You’re giving me a dirty look.”* He then begins cursing at her, and escalates further, yelling to the group: *“I want my money and then I’m gone. I won’t let you blackmail me. Otherwise, I’ll rip the TV off the wall, and I’ll only come back when you pay me. What are you gonna do? Call the cops? I won’t let you fuck me over!”*

Sophia is visibly shaken and tears up – the meeting is quickly adjourned. Some people go to their rooms; others sit down on the couch to have a smoke. On the couch, Mason

points to a sense of powerless that seems to live in the participant group about this situation. *“This has been going on for weeks. You just want him gone – but what can you do?”*

Oliver continues to speak with Tyrell at the other side of the room. Tyrell claims that Luke is never around, and that when he is, he’s playing darts. *“You don’t even know half of what’s going on,”* he says. He also insists, *“She’s not acting professional. Aren’t you all supposed to be professionals? This is street life – this is how we talk to each other.”* Oliver replies that while NuNN may work with people from the street, it also tries to uphold a different set of norms – something Tyrell immediately contests, saying they are never present enough to enforce those norms.

When the group reconvenes, Oliver invites others to share their thoughts: *“We’ve been talking a lot with each other, but I’m also curious to hear what others think. I want others to speak up.”*

Josep says that for him, it’s not so much *what* is said, but *how* it’s said, that makes the difference.

Ali shares that he too once had a clash with Emily but appreciated that she followed up with a personal conversation. He says he understands how reactions can escalate, but that he wasn’t there for the incident with Luke.

Tyrell says, *“For me it’s nothing – maybe for them it is.”*

Jimmy echoes that he wasn’t present either and can’t really comment.

Then Mason cautiously speaks up: *“If I may say something – I do sometimes find your behavior intimidating.”*

Tyrell raises his voice without hesitation: *“Not my problem, man! All white people in the Netherlands find me intimidating! If you feel intimidated, what am I supposed to do? Paint my face white? Because that’s what it’s about, right?”*

Oliver gently follows up: *“But can you do something with that feedback? If someone tells you something about your behavior?”* – but Tyrell doesn’t really respond. Despite the social workers’ repeated efforts to guide the group – toward voicing boundaries, proposing consequences, and creating space for Tyrell’s reflection – little of substance emerges.

The withdrawal

After the meeting, staff gather in the downstairs office. They realize they have reached an impasse. The group is unable to self-regulate due to fear, yet the professionals feel trapped by the philosophy of the program, as a social worker later notes: *“Looking back, I think we, as a team, sometimes put self-management on too high a pedestal. We kept asking ourselves: ‘When do we take control back? At what point is the situation too unsafe to leave decisions to the group?’”* (F5)

This moment reveals the boundaries of professional structuring and guiding. For a long time, staff rely on softer mechanisms: they uphold the meeting structure, reiterate core values, invite the group to speak up, and wait for participants to assume ownership. Once the foundation of trust within a group erodes, however, these mechanisms lose effect. In a final attempt to force the system to work, the team decides on a radical course of action, a final attempt to convince the participant group that they should ban Tyrell from the shelter: withdrawal. As Luke later noted: *“We basically closed the office. Only one colleague came in briefly to handle cash matters; nobody else showed up. We more or less said to the group: ‘You figure it out,’ hoping this would finally force them to make a decision. We simply stated collectively: we’re not doing this anymore. We just hoped they would miss us badly enough to feel the urge to send him away”* (F5).

That same week, the staff do everything they can to arrange a placement for Tyrell elsewhere – successfully. At the next meeting, it is clear to everybody that Tyrell’s stay has come to an end. In the end, the group votes that he must leave the shelter. Against expectations, he leaves calmly. His stay ends with a fizzle, rather than a bang.

In this illustration, the limits of self-management become unusually clear. It highlights that a group’s capacity has limits: peer support easily flips into peer pressure or strategic silence when safety is at stake. It also exposes the dilemma of the frontline professionals. For a long time, they wait for the group to act, constrained by their own ideals of self-management. As one social worker put it, reflecting on this episode: *“I’ve always believed in self-management, but this was the first time I thought: fuck self-management. It made me realize how fragile it actually is.”* (F5)

Analytically, Tyrell’s case illustrates the core argument of Chapter 8: the mechanisms that enable co-production – mutual support, peer socialization, peer discretion, and peer governance – have a dual potential. Under pressure, they can be redirected toward avoidance, silence, and a culture of fear, rather than the collective interest. In terms of group characteristics, the case also shows how a relatively large, fluid group with uneven vulnerabilities reaches the limits of its collective capacity: Tyrell’s

combination of behavioral problems and intellectual disability, combined with a lack of stable, core members willing to confront him to protect the social workers, stretches the group beyond what it can reasonably self-regulate.

At the same time, the episode crystallizes the four frontline challenges analyzed in Chapter 9. Norms and values clash over what counts as acceptable behavior, as Tyrell repeatedly invokes street norms and dismisses the shelter's core norms; professionals become dependent on a group that avoids difficult decisions; and, in the end, staff remain externally accountable for safety and basic standards, even when they have temporarily ceded internal responsibility to participants. Tyrell's case, then, serves as an extreme stress test that reveals how co-production can be both remarkably resilient and surprisingly brittle. It shows that when the shared moral ground erodes, the mechanisms of peer governance (Chapter 8) fail, and professionals (Chapter 9) are left with no good options but to intervene, as much as they deem possible within their role.

Finally, it is important to note that such extreme behavior is likely to disrupt organizational procedures in any setting, not just in co-production. Had Tyrell behaved this way in a standard shelter, it would likely have strained staff and procedures there as well. However, the way this disruption played out is distinct. In a traditional service model, such behavior is met with vertical professional authority. In this self-management setting, the disruption strikes at the heart of the model itself: it paralyzes the collective capacity of the group. Moreover, while Tyrell is an extreme case and certainly not the 'norm' within the shelter, he does fall within its target group of homeless services. He was not an outsider who slipped in by mistake; he represents the more complex, volatile segment of the population that NuNN aims to support. Stories about 'tyrants' or 'manipulative narcissists' are more widespread, but often, groups are more capable of regulating themselves in the end. Therefore, this case does more than just signal extreme behavior: it also reveals tensions inherent to the co-production program.

Section conclusion: The dynamics of co-production

This section analyzed the day-to-day processes of co-production. Chapter 8 argued that co-production not only involves professionals and participants working together but also shapes social groups. Group dynamics – shaped by size, stability, and participants' vulnerabilities – are intrinsic to group co-production and offer both potential and risk for co-production. Participants continuously engage in informal

and formal forms of self-regulation – supporting, confronting, socializing, and governing one another.

Although these forms of co-production transform frontline work, professional support remains essential – not to direct every action, but to structure the program, articulate core norms and values, and intervene when needed. At the same time, co-production generates four inherent challenges for frontline workers: negotiating roles and responsibilities; mediating conflicting interests and values; operating under heightened dependence and uncertainty; and sharing responsibility while remaining accountable to external partners.

The section ended with an example of how all these dynamics can make co-production derail. But these co-production efforts would not have existed anymore if such derailment were the norm – often, it works. This raises the question of what it takes to make co-production work. Under which conditions can the practice of co-production match its promise? The next, and final, empirical section turns to this question.

Empirical section III:

Conditions for successful co-production

The degree to which co-production ambitions are realized in practice tends to vary throughout the process. This variation is shaped primarily by group dynamics and the ways in which frontline workers structure, guide, and intervene in the program. This section analyzes which conditions enable co-production to succeed. While it is difficult to qualify what this means, I define co-production success as the degree of alignment between a program as intended and its actual functioning in practice. In short, I analyze which conditions enable programs' practical implementation to match their ambitions. The sub-question asked in this empirical section is: *Which empirical conditions enable co-production processes to unfold successfully?*

While generally the same conditions enable co-production in all programs, it should be noted that some conditions are more important for some programs than others. What seems to matter most is therefore that there must be an alignment between a program's ambitions, embodied in the program structures analyzed in Chapter 6, and its set of facilitating conditions (also see McMullin 2024).

To analyze which conditions enable co-production, I take a thematic approach, discussing the co-production programs in parallel, using a bottom-up perspective. This means that I start with the participants, then analyze the co-production structure, followed by the frontline staff, organization, and, finally, the (interaction with the) organizational environment. While I discuss each condition separately, we should keep in mind that the conditions discussed are interconnected.



Chapter 10.

The participant group: Composition,
trust, and commitment

The previous chapters argued that the dynamics in participant groups are central to how co-production processes unfold in practice. While they serve as a motor for co-production, they might also occasionally make it drift from its intentions. This brings us to the next question: what, then, is needed from participant groups to ensure that these social dynamics are predominantly positive and to ensure that co-production unfolds successfully?

This chapter explains which conditions in participant groups seem to make co-production more successful. It appears that the process hinges primarily on a balanced group composition, trust, and commitment. These do not serve as preconditions; rather, they are often developed (or, conversely, eroded) throughout the co-production process itself. Although we discuss trust and commitment here under the category of participant group, these are inherently relational concepts. It is sometimes difficult to separate trust and commitment *within* participant groups from those *between* participants and professional staff. Nevertheless, in this section, we will focus primarily on trust and commitment among participants themselves and between participants and service providers, leaving the inverse dynamic for later discussion.

10.1 A balanced group in capacity, vulnerability, and personality

Across all co-production programs, successful co-production appears to require a participant group that is balanced in terms of capacity, vulnerability, and character. What matters is whether there is sufficient *collective capacity* to carry out the intended tasks and keep the program running, while still remaining inclusive to newcomers and to the intended target group.

For some people, participation is simply out of reach. As one volunteer at NuNN states: “*Not everyone can do it. Some people have too much chaos in their heads, too much stress.*” (CP1). The same holds for the visitor-volunteer program: although it offers a relatively accessible entry level, it is still not feasible for all visitors to take on a volunteer role. At the client council, similarly, some topics are difficult for people to follow, and some attendees may be physically present at meetings but disengage from what is being discussed. This becomes more apparent as issues grow more complex. As one manager explains:

Sometimes people just don't understand what's being discussed, even when you think it's important. You have a clear sense of where things should go, but you can't explain it properly because it's genuinely complicated. And you also have to accept that some people in the council have an IQ of 70 or 80 at most, which doesn't always align with complex decision-making structures. Not everything is easy, but the simpler it is, the better the discussion. (M3)¹⁹

For active participation in residents' or council meetings, some cognitive capacities are therefore required. For most of the tasks in the programs, at least some communicative capacities and language skills are needed. Certain characteristics may prevent people from fully functioning within co-production structures. For example, as previously mentioned, limitations in cognitive capacities can hinder some participants from fully understanding topics discussed during the client council meetings. These limitations may relate to personality characteristics or vulnerabilities such as intellectual disabilities or insufficient language skills. Additionally, issues such as addiction – particularly heavy heroin or alcohol use – can significantly impede participants' abilities to fulfill tasks and responsibilities during their shifts.

In short, the functioning of co-production can be affected by people's personalities, problems, or a (lack of) capacity. For example, a social worker at NuNN argues that the shelter is unsuitable for various people:

Another group is people who are so deep in their drug use that it seriously affects their behavior, and since drugs are handled freely here, it becomes genuinely risky when someone starts displaying extreme behavior as a result. Conversely, people who don't use drugs often won't feel at home here either. There's also the group who can't stand up for themselves – if you can't speak up, you won't make yourself heard in meetings. So are you really part of the self-management then, or are you just being carried along by the rest? And of course, language barriers are a huge issue. Some people are doing well and are much more stable now, but without Dutch or English, they can't take on a volunteer role. And that's unfortunate, because it's quite a few people – we have, I think, five or six now who don't speak Dutch. That really is a problem. (F8)

¹⁹ Van Straaten et al. (2014) found that about 30 percent of those using homelessness services in the four biggest Dutch cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, The Hague) have a suspected intellectual disability.

While sufficient capacity is necessary, there should also be room for participants' growth. As an employee at a drop-in center explains regarding NOIZ: *"It's extremely difficult to find someone who is sufficiently committed and capable to become a caretaker (...) This has to grow naturally"* (F10). Thus, programs must strike a balance: they should be accessible enough to allow vulnerable individuals to participate and develop, while simultaneously ensuring there is enough capability among participants to maintain the program's functioning. Usually, this results in finding a balance in a group with sufficient participants who can take on their duties to sustain the co-production, while some are still learning, and others are unlikely to reach that level of participation. For the latter group, involvement may serve primarily as meaningful daytime activities; however, programs would struggle to function if this group became too large.

What constitutes a workable balance between these groups differs from program to program. In the visitor-volunteer program, tasks are relatively straightforward and strongly supported by professionals, so the program can accommodate participants whose capacities are more limited in relation to these tasks. By contrast, NOIZ depends on two caretakers per location, which means that each caretaker must meet a basic threshold of reliability, communication, and self-regulation. Even when one caretaker takes the lead and the other primarily assists with practical tasks – for example, when language barriers complicate communication with staff – there still needs to be a minimum fit between the demands of the role and the capacities of the person fulfilling it.

Capacities are sometimes interlinked with personalities. At NOIZ, we previously saw that location managers often select caretakers based on capacity, need, and reliability. What stands out is that these qualities are often linked to specific personal characteristics. A staff member at a drop-in center, for example, explains what he expects from a caretaker: *"I look at people's characters in the drop-in centers (...). You need to have a lot of patience (...) We want calm people. People who respect everyone. People who take responsibility when we're not there"* (F13). Calmness and patience are considered essential qualities. Staying calm helps de-escalate potential conflicts, creating a safe and stable environment while allowing caretakers to serve as role models. As one caretaker describes: *"The most important thing is to stay calm. If you're nervous, you're not doing it right, and you might turn a small problem into a bigger one"* (CP14).

At NuNN, too, a balance of personalities is often seen as playing an important role in ensuring a functional group dynamic. As a social worker at NuNN puts it: *"A certain mix of personalities can really disrupt the system"* (F2). Another adds: *"Personality, as far*

as I'm concerned, is the biggest thing. It has more to do with personality than with drug use. Right now, there are just a lot of people with antisocial personalities, people who are simply very manipulative. That's why things aren't going well" (F5). Another social worker adds: *"If someone is really bullying too much, looking down on guests, and starting to act like a bit of a tyrant – like someone with a narcissistic personality who loves being in charge – then it's important to have a group that holds them accountable. Like, 'Go back to being a guest for two weeks instead of a volunteer, and then you'll come back with a different attitude'"* (F9). Similarly, another social worker notes that service users need to be willing to accept the principle of self-regulation in groups: *"If you can't be addressed by your peers, it just stops there; because that's what it all runs on"* (F8). As we have already seen, a balance of personalities is important as well for the visitor-volunteer program and the client council. As discussed, some visitor-volunteers can *"lose it quite quickly,"* (F11) and at councils some personalities may spark conflict that potentially disrupt the co-production process. In these settings, the group's ability to regulate such dynamics is an important part of its collective capacity.

Ultimately, participant groups require balance in terms of capacity, character, and vulnerability. There must be enough collective capacity to keep programs operational, yet programs must remain inclusive enough to engage their target group and to offer newcomers the possibility to grow. As one of NuNN's frontline workers notes: *"It has to keep running. Certain things need to be done. There must be some kind of dynamic – you always have a few people who take the lead and others who follow, and that's perfectly fine. Everyone has a different role within a group. But it's important that there's a sense of harmony, that the necessary things get done, and that it remains a shelter for people who need it"* (F5).

10.2 Trust (and distrust) among participants

Across all programs, trust among participants emerges as a key facilitator for co-production to work well. This concerns both trust between participants themselves and trust from participants toward professionals. Yet the dynamics of trust are more ambiguous than one might expect. Fieldwork shows that co-production often starts from a position of general distrust – or at best an absence of trust – especially among new participants who lack strong relationships with professionals and/or fellow participants. While trust can be built, many participants remain distrustful toward the organization – or, more broadly, “the system.”

The following quote by a NuNN participant captures this dynamic:

I've noticed that there's very little financial transparency. (...) They always say: You're allowed to look at everything, but we never get to that point. We sometimes hear about the debts people have, but we never actually see what kinds of expenses there are, how much money is even in there at all. Because for all I know – and don't get me wrong: I don't see (social worker) as someone who would do this – but for all I know, he could be transferring a hundred euros to his own account every week. I mean, I wouldn't know, hypothetically speaking. I don't think he would do that, but I'm using it as an example. (CP2)

Even though the participant explicitly expresses trust in the social worker's integrity, a sense of unease remains about the potential for abuse of professional powers. Fieldwork suggests that this more structural form of distrust toward “the system” is prevalent among many service users and participants. It does not only concern NuNN and DRG, but may also extend to other (government) organizations. Such systemic distrust especially surfaces in NuNN's residents' meetings and in DRG's council meetings. Participants sometimes voice suspicions, for instance, that DRG intentionally perpetuates homelessness to secure its funding, that staff members and (fellow) visitor-volunteers keep the best charitably donated items (such as clothing) for themselves, or that DRG diverts money to Ukrainian refugees at the expense of homeless people. In short, systemic distrust and personal trust often coexist. Participants may remain highly skeptical of the organization as a whole while at the same time placing considerable trust in individual staff members – for example, by asking them to sort out online banking issues or inviting them to personal celebrations such as birthday parties.

While not all distrust needs to be eliminated, some forms of distrust can serve as a barrier to co-production. At the client council program, for instance, some participants report that, although they can think of other visitors who would be good candidates, those visitors fear that being too critical of the organization could have negative consequences in their interactions with professionals at the drop-in center. There is no evidence that such repercussions actually occur, and the codetermination agreement explicitly includes safeguards to prevent them. However, the fear is understandable. Service users often depend on the drop-in centers for access to basic needs such as daily shelter, food, water, and showers. Under such conditions, even a small perceived risk that participation might be used against them can feel too dangerous and become a substantial barrier. Especially in co-production settings like NuNN and the client council, where speaking up is expected, participants need to believe that what they say will not be held against them. Distrust toward the

organization or fellow participants can therefore limit who dares to participate and what they are willing to say.

At the same time, the continuation of co-production does not necessarily require that all distrust toward the organization be resolved. As one long-time member of the client council puts it: *“It doesn’t matter what we say, they’ll do whatever they want anyway”* (CP26). Despite this pronounced skepticism, the participant continues to attend council meetings and contribute. In such cases, participants seem to distinguish between low expectations regarding organizational responsiveness and a more practical trust that their involvement is at least safe and meaningful at the interpersonal level.

For co-production to function well, however, a certain degree of trust within the participant group and toward frontline staff does seem beneficial. Several caretakers at NOIZ, for example, emphasize how important it is for them to know that staff members “have their back” – especially in crisis situations – and that they can rely on them when needed. At both the client council and the visitor–volunteer program, trust largely concerns participants feeling that they are taken seriously, that their input is valued, and that their involvement has real meaning. This kind of trust often takes time to develop. As one visitor–volunteer and council member explains:

Trust is the most important thing: if they trust me and I trust them, we can achieve great things together. For me, it was really important that I, for example, had the key to the drop-in center or was allowed to do the grocery shopping... That shows you that people trust you. As someone who’s been homeless or lived on the street, you haven’t had a key for a very long time – and then someone gives you one. That gives you the feeling that people trust you. And that feels good. (CP19)

Such trust can indeed develop over time, sometimes to the point of personal, friendship-like relationships between participants and professional staff. As one visitor–volunteer and council member shared: *“Meanwhile, I’ve developed such a good bond with [drop-in center manager], who is the head of this location. She’s really become more of a friend, too. We work out together. Every morning, we say good morning, and we also just do fun things together. I’ve built such a strong bond of trust with her”* (CP22).

At NuNN, trust in professionals can also be helpful, but it appears to be less of a strict prerequisite for participation. What matters most there is trust among participants. A baseline level of trust is needed not so much to perform self-management tasks

– such as running three shifts a week or attending meetings – but to ensure that meetings are safe spaces for open conversation. The main barrier is not a lack of trust in staff, but fear that fellow participants might use what is said against someone. The self-management program is built on the expectation that participants will speak openly, support each other, and offer criticism when needed. While not every issue has to be discussed out loud, it is crucial that participants feel safe enough to express themselves. Otherwise, a culture of silence can quickly take hold.

In sum, a baseline level of trust appears essential for both participation and the effective functioning of co-production – between participants themselves and toward frontline professionals. Although trust is often low at the outset and remains fragile, it can grow over time. At the same time, some degree of distrust – especially toward the broader organization or system – may persist without necessarily preventing co-production from taking place. What matters is that participants feel safe enough to speak, act, and take responsibility within co-production. Still, trust alone does not suffice. Meaningful co-production also depends on participants' commitment.

10.3 Participants' commitment

A significant answer to what is needed among participants for co-production to function well lies in the commitment of a group to the practices, values, and goals of a program and the organization as a whole. As explored in the theoretical chapter, commitment refers both to participants' emotional attachment, cognitive alignment, and willingness to act on behalf of the co-production program (Solinger et al. 2008) and to the credibility of the commitments made (Robertson and Tang 1995). In other words, commitment concerns both how strongly participants feel attached to the program and how consistent and believable their obligations are in practice.

Across all programs, a higher level of collective commitment appears to result in better functioning co-production. At NuNN, a committed participant group is reflected in taking their shifts seriously, attending the meetings, and taking actions and decisions that largely reflect the shelter's intended service values. Therefore, social workers and participants often emphasize the need for group commitment, described as a *"sense of responsibility for the NuNN"* (CP2; CP5; CP6) among a group, or a group that is *"engaged with the NuNN"* (F1; F2; F4). As one participant states, *"what is important for self-management is responsibility and having your own vision: How do you see the NuNN? (...) That vision, being a bit proud of it and that you get to do it all together"* (CP4). This points to both identification with the shelter and a willingness to act in support

of it. A social worker adds that it is important to generate a sense of ownership among participants over the process, and that they should share the same basic norms and values that guide the service providers:

For self-management to succeed, people really have to experience that “this thing is our thing.” If you don’t, you won’t give a damn about it. That’s what you must create together, and that’s really difficult and a real challenge. And it’s important that they have the same norms and values, such as that the street is sacred, and that violence is a no-go. You need the right people for this, people who look forward to doing this together. (F6)

While individual participants may not immediately have this commitment, it is important that at any given time there is a sufficiently committed core to make self-management function according to these basic norms.

Strongly committed participants express a willingness to go beyond the predetermined responsibilities in the program and extend their participation to further the co-production’s objective. At the client councils, for instance, this is reflected in participants’ willingness to not only initiate plans, but also to take an active role in their implementation. Similarly, committed caretakers at NOIZ interpret their responsibilities more broadly than the program envisions, which demonstrates a strong dedication to the concept. As a caretaker puts it: *“I also teach people how to pick up their normal lives again. Some of those who come here are really lost. That’s why I always say: we must be a team here – caring for one another, not just thinking of ourselves. I simply try to create a team among the men, and that works very well”* (CP14). Here, commitment becomes visible as a readiness to take responsibility for others’ well-being, rather than just focusing on the necessary practicalities.

Many interviewed visitor-volunteers and council members, too, portray high levels of commitment to co-production. This is reflected, for example, in their identification with the program and the organization. One participant, active both as a visitor-volunteer and council member, states:

Over the years, I have come to feel more and more like a part of the organization because they have really supported me – helped me tremendously, even in personal matters. If I had problems, I could talk to social workers; if I had no money, the staff would step in for a moment, or if I was feeling down and needed to talk about my struggles.

They have always been there for me and never discriminated against me because I was homeless. Instead, they valued me for who I am as an individual. That's why I truly feel like I belong to De Regenboog – that's why I'm here. (CP23)

This passage illustrates how trust and commitment can be built over time, ultimately fostering not only strong and lasting involvement with a co-production effort but also with the organization as a whole. At NuNN, this long-term connection is unmistakable, as one participant notes: *“There are people who still come here after many years, and that's not without reason; you don't see that in any other shelter. It's simply because there's a bit of a family feeling here”* (CP11). The prime example of this at NuNN is Benny. Years ago, he relied on the shelter's services, but now, having secured a more stable living situation, he still stops by nearly every day – to clean, tidy up, or help out in whatever way he can. Just as importantly, he comes simply for a chat. In fact, some former participants are so eager to return that current groups occasionally set boundaries to limit this. As a social worker raises during a meeting: *“I wanted to bring up [former participant], because he drops by frequently, and technically, we have rules about that, except for Benny, of course. But I'm hearing mixed reactions – some people are fine with it, others not so much”* (F6). These examples show how strong commitment can persist even after participants have exited the formal target group, creating long-term social connections through co-production.

When commitment is lacking

The importance of commitment becomes especially visible through contrast. While all programs usually have enough committed participants to keep the program afloat and in line with the program's intended values and objectives, this is not always the case. In such situations, co-production at best occurs as something instrumental and opportunistic, where people engage in co-production so long as it benefits them, but do not seem to internalize the underlying goals and objectives. Sometimes participant groups with a lack of commitment even let the co-production drift away from its intended objectives – and in some programs, undermine important service values.

Less committed participants seem to be less concerned about co-production's overall functioning and are more focused on themselves. One caretaker, for instance, explains the importance of commitment and intrinsic motivation: *“You need the right people. If it were only [the other caretaker], there would be more problems (...) because his motivation is to earn money for his family. My main motivation here is to ensure that people feel free and comfortable”* (CP13). While the caretaker speaks of differing motivations,

this quote also depicts a difference in *commitment* to the program. Whereas the respondent subscribes to the underlying values and objectives of the NOIZ program and the organization, which in turn creates a high willingness to act on its behalf, the other caretaker's effort is minimal – allegedly. The same goes for NuNN, where respondents do suspect that money is the sole motivator, as a manager at the NuNN program states: *“Some people really don’t give a damn [about self-management], they just think ‘I can live here cheaply’”* (CP2).

Both organizational staff and participants at DRG’s client council frequently express concerns about some members’ perceived lack of commitment. As a participant notes: *“Those people who sit on multiple councils are only in it for the money, you know. But you’re supposed to contribute, to have something to say, or to support the constituents; that’s the whole point. Not just to show up, take the food and the money, and leave again”* (CP26). This sparks frustration among location managers who serve as the collaboration partner of the councils. As one drop-in center manager states, the main issue is a lack of representativeness and responsiveness, and the failure of council members to facilitate constituents’ involvement in the councils. A location manager expresses frustration about the council’s lack of effort and capacity to represent the daily visitors of the drop-in center, and sees it as a fundamental fault in the program:

People who have had housing for a long time never come here anymore, yet still have a say. Meanwhile, I think about the people who actually do come here often, and it’s hard to bring them to the meetings. But if they miss two or three meetings, they’re already out of the council. The guys who visit the drop-in centers don’t necessarily show up at the council meeting every month – sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. But the rules are so rigid that they’re quickly excluded. At the same time, they do have the right to give advice and express their opinions, which is exactly what we encourage. But for that, you must actually show up at the drop-in center. If you never come here, if you have stable housing and just occasionally make a few statements, that’s kind of pointless. No, no, I don’t really see the value in that. (FM4)

However, this also shows difficulties with maintaining commitment. The location manager cites a lack of commitment from the participants because they are not willing to allow the drop-in center’s ‘actual users’ some flexibility to come when they can. Yet at the same time, council members may see these people’s failure to consistently show up as a lack of commitment to the council, which makes them enforce the rules about sustained presence at the council meetings.

At NuNN, episodes of lacking commitment become the most pronounced because its co-production program structure combines high participant empowerment with few organizational mechanisms to manage the co-production. Here, due to the consistent turnover in service users and the minimal requirements for becoming a co-producer, groups may become unbalanced, and their commitment to co-production can wane from time to time. As a social worker notes: *“It really varies from group to group. Sometimes you have a group that takes its responsibility very seriously, where people motivate each other and expect everyone to show up. And sometimes, that sense of responsibility is less present (...) You can see this, for example, in meeting attendance”* (F5).

As a former NuNN participant states: *“With the right people participating, self-management is a magic formula for everyone – also those who don't participate; if you don't have the right people, well, things can get out of hand”* (CP6). Too many people incapable of fulfilling their tasks can create frustration about free-riding, leading to a waning motivation altogether. These incidental episodes of co-production in times of lacking commitment are useful in illustrating the importance of commitment and what happens when participants do not deem each other's commitments as credible anymore. This becomes especially clear in the following excerpt.

Box 10.1 You never do anything

You never do anything

During the meeting, the participants evaluate each other's performance in the past week. Olivia asks how Ali, who is not here, did. Josep responds: *“Everyone always says that he did well... Ali was good, but that doesn't apply to everyone here.”* He seems quite irritated about it.

Mason, who presides over the meeting, seems to have something to hide. Normally, people take time to evaluate everyone's performance patiently, but right now, he rushes through the participants' names on his list. Olivia and Emily ask if he could slow down a bit. It turns out that Mason wasn't at his shift last week; Josep confronts him about it, and Noah does too.

Josep makes a general point to everyone: *“It often goes like this here, doesn't it? Nobody opens their mouth about it.”*

Michael says: *“You know what it is. Nobody does their duties properly, but that is also because nobody wants to move up. Even people in the manager apartments don't get warnings because nobody wants to move there.”*

Josep: *“Jackson hasn't been doing duties either since he became a manager,”* then he turns to Jimmy, a longtime manager who is known for doing little work and keeping quiet during the meetings, apart from the few times he asks for a

smoking break: *"And Jimmy is always either sleeping or chasing the dragon during his shifts!"* He looks at Jimmy and says: *"You never do anything."*

Noah agrees and adds to Jimmy: *"I never see you do anything at your night shifts, you know."*

Oliver, a social worker, says: *"Jimmy is there, though."*

Noah and Josep react agitatedly: *"But he does absolutely nothing."*

Oliver: *"But it starts with being present. Many people don't even do that."*

Ali, Noah, and Josep react, stating that, also, too many people do too little, whether they show up or not.

Emily: *"The signs have been there for a while that you do little, Jimmy."*

Jimmy defends himself, stating that he *does* do something, but before he can finish the sentence, Josep reacts: *"Do you really dare to say that? Then you are the biggest idiot I've seen."*

Oliver, to the group: *"The presence – there are few people who actually finish full eight-hour [night] shifts, you know. I'm happy in the morning because Jimmy is there."*

Noah: *"I hear it already; Jimmy is the best volunteer here."*

Oliver: *"The first step is to show up."*

Noah stands up from his chair, saying: *"Why should I even cook then. It gets crazier here by the day. I don't agree with that; it's a pity you say that."*

Luke: *"It starts with being present. Like Jackson does not even come when he has to."*

Noah: *"Then he deserves a warning too."*

Emily: *"Okay, what do you guys want?"*

Josep: *"A warning for everyone."*

Emily: *"Jackson then?"*

Josep: *"Warning."*

The group votes that all should get a warning for not (properly) running their shifts.

Mason, Noah, Josep, Jimmy, Ali, Jackson, and Michael are task volunteers; Emily, Olivia, Luke, and Oliver are social workers

The excerpt above shows the frustrations created by participants' perceptions of others' lack of commitment to co-production. This lack of commitment, however, is also related to Jimmy's problems and vulnerabilities: His heroin use seems to affect his functioning in co-production. This causes frustration among those who take their shifts more seriously, critiquing the unfairness of free-riding behavior (*"why should I even cook anymore then"*), and reduces their motivation. This illustrates how free-riding behavior undermines the credibility of commitments made. The two social workers

indicate that the most important thing is that people show up, rather than how they participate. They have a certain tolerance for Jimmy, as he *does* show up, even though it is widely known that he does little. For them, it is fine if people participate to *their ability*. They have a bigger problem with people like Jackson, who do not even show up. Especially Josep and Noah have little patience for this argument, as it is not like it is Jimmy's first week as a volunteer; showing up means little to them if it means that he is smoking heroin on the couch all night. By voicing these frustrations in the meeting, they challenge not only Jimmy's behavior but also the implicit norms about what counts as sufficient participation. By sharing these opinions in the meeting, the final decisions reflect both the social workers' and the participants' points of view and create a decision that is legitimized by the participants. Thereby, the conflict and frustrations voiced in the excerpt can potentially prove to be productive in re-establishing mutual expectations and strengthening the credibility of the commitments made.

Importantly, in group co-production, participants affect each other's levels of commitment, as a social worker notes:

Someone just stopped showing up, or would cancel at the last minute. And then Ali said, "Yeah, well, if I end up in a manager apartment, I'm going to do the same thing." It's like, what's the point of keeping the place clean then? Because others start thinking: Oh, so I can get away with that too – if I don't clean, or don't do my shift properly, or show up late – well, they're doing it too. There's really this dynamic where, if one person doesn't stick to their responsibilities, everyone starts feeling like they don't have to either. (F8)

When a group's norms erode, correcting them becomes challenging. One participant states: "*We live in a group here, so there's always at least some kind of group dynamics, peer pressure or something; you don't want to get the group against you*" (CP2). This means that there can be periods where a group's actions and decisions no longer align with the program's stated intentions, underlying objectives, and core service values. In concrete terms, this can become visible in a gradual decline in adherence to rules and obligations, while at the same time, violations are either not sanctioned or only weakly or unevenly enforced. At NuNN, in cases of lacking commitment, social workers complain about participants' opportunism. Participants invoke the principle of self-management when it suits them but are unwilling to take on the more difficult decisions and responsibilities that come with it (F2; F8).

In sum, participants' commitment generally enables the co-production to function well. Committed participant groups take their tasks and responsibilities seriously, aligning their actions with the program's intentions. Moreover, their commitment can push the co-production beyond its intended scope, amplifying its impact beyond the program's original ambitions. Conversely, a lack of commitment within participant groups can lead to poorly functioning co-productions or even undermine the entire service being provided. At the same time, excessive involvement can also be problematic, potentially causing conflicts and frustration among other service users and staff.

When comparing the programs, the presence of commitment among participants seems to be especially crucial in the self-managed programs, NOIZ and NuNN. Because these programs place high responsibilities and autonomy on participants, operating with limited professional support, this raises the challenge of ensuring that participants handle their responsibilities in a way that reflects the underlying intentions of the co-production program – or at the very least, does not undermine them. Commitment is therefore essential: when participants endorse the values and goals of a co-production initiative, they are more likely to act accordingly, resulting in a well-functioning co-production.

While commitment plays an important role in all programs, the consequences of its absence among participant groups differ. At NuNN, the consequences are the most pronounced because professionals lack constant presence and formal instruments to solve commitment problems. At NOIZ, while the consequences can be severe and disruptive (as in the case of the intoxicated caretakers), the organization ultimately retains the power to replace caretakers, allowing for a swift resolution. In the client council, a lack of commitment may undermine a council's functioning itself. Yet, it does not immediately impact the whole service – the drop-in centers continue to operate regardless of the councils' functioning. At the visitor-volunteer program, commitment is less of a group matter and more of an individual dynamic between participants and the drop-in center staff. This makes it easier to manage, especially given that professional support can take a directive and interventionist approach where needed. This suggests that the more responsibility and autonomy a program assigns to participants, and the fewer formal tools professionals have to intervene, the more central collective commitment and credible commitments become for sustaining co-production.

Conclusion

Overall, for co-production to be effective, the participant group needs to be balanced in terms of capacities, vulnerabilities, and personalities, and to possess enough collective capacity to keep everyday work and decision-making going. Participants also require a baseline level of trust in one another and in frontline professionals in order to speak up and take responsibility, even if some degree of systemic distrust may persist. Finally, collective commitment among participants is essential for sustaining co-production over time and keeping it broadly aligned with the program's core aims and values.

Generating and maintaining such a group is difficult and only partly within the control of those involved. This raises an important question: how do co-production programs create the conditions under which such participant groups can emerge and endure? The next chapter turns to this question.



Chapter 11.

Program structure: Alignment with user wishes, needs, and capacities

The first empirical chapters devoted much attention to co-production structures, and with good reason: co-production structures do not only reflect an organization's co-production ambitions but also largely determine what the process entails in practice. Program structures embed intentions about who may and can participate, provide incentives for people to co-produce, and provide prescriptions about what participation even entails. This raises the question of which characteristics of program structures enable co-productions with vulnerable groups to function well.

Fundamentally, for co-production to occur, service users need to be willing and able to participate (Alford 2002; Van Eijk and Steen 2016). This boils down to the alignment of a program structure with the target group's capacities, needs, and wishes. Important characteristics of program structures, therefore, concern their embedded incentives, the roles and tasks for service users, and the ways in which participants are selected and excluded. As we will explore, the following conditions enable the co-production programs to engage their target groups:

- The program structures stimulate participation with a mix of incentives.
- The program structures provide achievable, meaningful opportunities for activity, development, and/or influence
- The program structures contain inclusion and exclusion mechanisms to regulate the composition of participant groups.

11.1 Material incentives matter – but not sufficiently for sustained engagement

All program structures incorporate material incentives that match the target group's pressing needs. The strongest and most fundamental incentives are provided by the self-managed programs: NuNN and NOIZ both offer shelter as an incentive. At NuNN, participants earn the privilege of daytime shelter. Traditionally a night shelter – like many in the country were, although there has been a shift in the past years toward more 24-hour shelter – the shelter created the incentive for active participants to be able to stay inside during the daytime. This is a strong motivator to stay inside, as mentioned in Chapter 6. Furthermore, the opportunity to move on to a manager apartment – the three social rent houses the organization has for two to three managers at a time – provides a strong incentive, alongside the agreement that, after two years of successful managership, people qualify for individual social housing placement. The NOIZ program, too, provides the basic need of shelter for caretakers. The fundamental reason why people are asked and prepared to serve as

caretakers is their need for a stable place to sleep. As a caretaker notes: *“I was sleeping out on the streets for three years, and then [drop-in center manager] asked me if I wanted to sleep here and be a caretaker”* (CP16). Obviously, this serves as a strong incentive to participate.

Money is a second incentive, which is mainly used by the visitor-volunteer and client council programs at DRG. Visitor-volunteers earn €7 per four-hour shift. Members of the client councils earn €6,50 per location council meeting, and €25 per meeting of the visitors’ council and the central council. This is a strong, though not the sole, motivator for many participants: *“Money motivates everyone,”* as a member of DRG’s location council said in advertising its new cleaning crew in the location – and it does. This becomes particularly evident during observations of the client council meetings. While most respondents note that money is not their prime motivation, the moment at the end of the meetings where the money is handed out is a moment of general excitement. This is recognized, as well, by both the independent advisors and the location managers. For instance, during a council meeting, the treasurers began counting cash and placing it into envelopes five minutes before the meeting ended. This prompted the advisor, slightly agitated, to say, *“Could you please wait a moment with that? Otherwise, people get distracted.”*

In the self-management programs, money also plays a role. At NOIZ, caretakers generally do not earn money, but shelter is free for them, as well as for NOIZ’s regular users. While NuNN’s model of self-management does not rely heavily on financial incentives, the shelter’s social workers do actively lobby the municipality to keep the user fee (for all service users) lower than that of other shelters in the city.

While these material incentives provide important motivations to co-produce, for most participants, they are not the only motivator. Other non-material rewards stimulate participants’ intrinsic motivations, such as solidary and expressive incentives (see also Alford 2002). At NuNN, for instance, nearly all respondents note that they appreciate the room the program offers for self-determination, personal growth, and meaningful daytime activities. At the visitor-volunteer program, most participants cite personal growth, the provision of structure to their lives, and a sense of responsibility as their main reasons for engaging. For some, the work helps establish routine and reduces harmful behaviors such as substance abuse, while others simply dislike idleness and want to feel useful. The same goes for the client council and the NOIZ programs: the opportunity to get responsibilities, to feel useful, and to learn and grow personally are important motivators. As a visitor-volunteer and council member notes:

It does give me a sense of fulfillment, especially in this situation. I notice that for myself. And it helps me stay focused on staying positive. I think that last part is the most important. I won't walk around with my head down, but of course, there are days when I think, *when will this finally be over?* You know? Because it's not fun. I don't enjoy it, but this is where I am, and I have to make the best of it. So that's why. I think that's the best answer. I feel involved, and I want to be involved.

As all programs are *group* co-productions, solidary rewards play another important role in if and why users participate. This is best illustrated by the following quote, that shows that group dynamics can both stimulate and inhibit people from participating:

Back then, almost everyone here was smoking crack or something. (...) I didn't get involved in that. So when I got here, you had to be out by ten o'clock and at five, I went to my room. And I just stayed there. Just me and my computer. I didn't want anything to do with that group back then. (...) After a while, though, a decent guy started to volunteer. At first, I just watched him. I thought, if he volunteers, then maybe I'll do it too. (CP3) At NuNN, some respondents speak of a kind of a *"family connection"* (CP10) – and others of *"housemates"* (CP1) – they have with fellow program participants. The same goes for some participants at NOIZ, where one caretaker describes a strong connection with users of the NOIZ – *"I'm the best friend of the guys in here"* (CP14).

These feelings of social belonging do not only concern fellow participants, but also the professional staff (and at the client council, the voluntary supporters as well) at the drop-in centers: *"For me, the biggest help is that I have like a family here (...) We are very good friends. Like, I belong to something. This is the biggest help I need. I don't need money. If I need money, I'll go to work. What I need, a place, safe, with good friends, like a team together, and that's it"* (CP14). While not everybody explicitly reports the social rewards in the interviews, the observations and informal conversations also show how participating creates a sense of social belonging for some participants. In the client councils, as well as in the visitor-volunteer program, longer-term friendships are frequently made.

Finally, some participants explicitly note expressive motivations. Especially at DRG's client council and NOIZ program, participants note that they feel committed to do something back for the organization, as well as for people experiencing homelessness in the city in general. As one notes: *"My biggest motivation is to make sure that the users of NOIZ can sleep safely here. If they weren't here, I would just sleep somewhere else"* (CP13).

Another explains: *“I’m just happy that I can do this. For me, it’s a way to repay what [drop-in center] did for me when I was homeless. And I enjoy doing it”* (CP14). A visitor volunteer and council member notes that: *“My main motivation is to be there for people in difficult times – especially when they’re homeless”* (CP23).

In sum, all programs offer material rewards for participation, such as shelter and money. While this provides strong incentives for people to participate, other intrinsic, solidary, and expressive motivations are generally the most important for people to keep participating enduringly. These, however, are not only embedded in the program structures, but are also created in interaction with other participants and professionals.

11.2 Low barriers for participation, flexibility, and opportunities to grow

While the role and tasks in each program vary, all programs have in common that the threshold for participation is *relatively* low and there is flexibility to grow and develop in the process. At NuNN, the requirements in practice are low, mainly relating to some proficiency in English or Dutch, the physical capacity to run shifts, and the social capacity to function in a group. Some tasks – such as cleaning – are very straightforward and manageable for virtually all service users. Other tasks, such as cooking and grocery shopping or taking an active role in the residents’ meetings, may be more challenging. However, individual participants do not have to (be able to) perform all aspects of the co-production. For instance, there is often a group of five cooks who provide dinner throughout the week. This means that not every participant has to be an “all-round” co-producer: tasks are distributed in such a way that different strengths can be used while the group as a whole provides sufficient capacity. As a participant notes:

Everyone has a certain skill – that’s what I always say. Now, you shouldn’t put me in charge of the cooking. (...) Cooking for that many people... I always say, “I’m not running a soup kitchen.” (...) But yeah, there are guys here who are really good at cooking, so they take care of that. And, for example, some people just have a natural rhythm – they usually take the day shifts and things like that. Others are more like night owls, so they take the night shifts. So yeah, when it comes to shifts and responsibilities around here, we do take the person into

account. Like, “Hey, what is this person good at? And what would they actually want to do?” (CP9)

This quote illustrates how the division of labor at NuNN explicitly takes individual preferences and capacities into account, while ensuring that, at the collective level, all essential tasks are covered.

At the visitor-volunteer program, the tasks are relatively undemanding, as well, usually starting with tasks that require little responsibility or specific skills. As mentioned, some drop-in centers usually first allow people to be part of the cleaning crew or perform another straightforward task. Incrementally, participants may pick up additional or different tasks that suit their interests and capacities, allowing them to grow in the process. Participants may develop themselves within the program, but it also provides opportunities outside of it, as the organization also runs social enterprise programs outside of the drop-in centers. Moreover, some visitor-volunteers have gone on to become professional staff members in the organization. It all depends on a participant’s personal situation, as a location manager notes:

Drop-in centers can sometimes be quite a toxic environment for people. If someone is doing well in their recovery – keeping busy with daytime activities, maybe using less or even quitting altogether – that’s a whole different situation. In that case, we might suggest, “Hey, have you thought about working at the bike repair shop? Or the big laundromat? Or maybe the community farm?” Just to help them step out of this world a little. Some people move on. And then there are people like (...), who’s been here for years and will probably stay for years. (...) He enjoys it. And you shouldn’t keep pushing, asking, “Are you still happy here?” Of course, check in once in a while, but you don’t need to keep offering alternatives. (FM1)

These examples show how NuNN and the visitor-volunteer program keep formal entry requirements low, while using differentiated tasks and flexible pathways to accommodate participants’ diverse capacities and trajectories.

The client council strives to keep entry barriers low. Its professional advisor emphasizes that selection criteria should not be overly strict: *“That would be like saying you’re only allowed to go to the gym if you’re not overweight”* (EA1). The only explicit requirements for participants are that they visit a drop-in center at least once every two weeks and consistently attend council meetings – preferably on time – or

communicate if they cannot make it. Participants may be suspended or dismissed if they repeatedly fail to meet these requirements, disrupt the council's functioning, or cause harm to the group. Yet, while some individuals structurally failed to meet these expectations, no one was suspended or dismissed during the fieldwork period. This suggests that while rules are verbally enforced, sanctions are rarely applied.

At the same time, some topics – particularly in the higher councils, such as the visitors' council and the central council – no longer align well with many participants' capacities or everyday experiences. As the director explains:

If you look at the location councils, they are very concrete, very close to people's daily lives, and relatively easy to oversee. They talk about the ordinary things that keep happening there, and that works well. In principle, most issues should be dealt with at that level. Some matters concern all drop-in centers, and that is still manageable. But at higher levels, I often experience the meetings as insufficiently effective. The agenda then fills up with rather technical, conditional topics, like the new participation agreement. It becomes endless. And by the time such a document is finally finished, it goes all the way back again to the location councils. In practice, these are highly abstract issues. Before you know it, the organization and the council advisor are discussing them among themselves, rather than with the council. That is not how it is supposed to be, but it shows that the subject matter is simply too complex. (M4)

This suggests that there are limits to how accessible certain tasks and topics can be made in practice. In such cases, the co-production may still hold symbolic value – by signaling that the organization takes user opinions into account in organizational policy – but, according to several staff members, its substantive functioning remains limited.

What helps in aligning program tasks with participants' capacities is that co-production is a group matter. Across programs, responsibilities are also organized in groups rather than placed on individuals alone. At NuNN, most shifts are run by two residents; at NOIZ, each location is staffed by two caretakers; and in the client participation structure, locations are, in principle, represented by two council members. In a similar vein, visitor-volunteers' tasks can be handled by professional staff when something goes wrong. This built-in redundancy creates a collective capacity to cope when someone fails to meet their obligations. It reduces the risk that individual unreliability immediately undermines co-production, while also

preventing the full burden of compensation from falling on one other participant. In this way, program design structurally supports collective capacity: even with low individual entry thresholds, the group rather than any single participant becomes the primary bearer of responsibility.

In sum, the programs put up relatively few barriers for new participants, enabling them to grow throughout the process. This approach makes co-production accessible to a wide range of users with vulnerabilities. While initial barriers are low, NuNN, the visitor-volunteer program, and the client council do provide participants with opportunities for further development – both within and beyond the program. People can join in the program or develop in it at their own pace. At the same time, not all program activities are attainable for all participants.

11.3 Selection and exclusion mechanisms

All programs target relatively vulnerable populations with complex problems and sometimes include people with issues, such as psychiatric disorders, aggression, or disruptive drug use. In these contexts, effective co-production requires the presence of selection and exclusion mechanisms for participants. It is essential that individuals can be denied access to or be excluded from the programs.

This need is evident across all cases, but it appears to be most pressing in the two self-management programs because professional support is only available at a distance, limiting what can be expected from participants. NOIZ stands out as the program that relies strongly on preemptive selection criteria for the *users* of the program, targeting people with paid work and without complex problems. However, when it comes to the demanding role of caretaker, the program has remarkably few general demands – other than the requirement of being willing to obtain a first aid and safety certificate and abstaining from drugs and alcohol. And, even then, the program allows location managers some flexibility to deviate from these criteria when deemed appropriate. As one example illustrates: *“We had a caretaker who was addicted to hard drugs, which actually is a contraindication for the program. And he handled it just fine, even staying there at night while still getting things done that needed to be done”* (FM2). This shows that selection is not purely rule-driven: frontline managers assess on a case-by-case basis what is feasible and safe in a specific setting.

At NuNN, there are few selection criteria to be allowed into the shelter. The program offers differentiation in levels of inclusion: it may occur that individuals are not

admitted as participants in the co-production program, yet they can still use the night shelter as guests. This applies, for example, to those who are unable to fulfill the responsibilities associated with active participation adequately, thereby undermining the collective commitment of the group, even though they can function well as guests. Temporary exclusion from the program can also serve to sanction and, in turn, motivate people again. However, it can also be necessary to exclude people from the shelter entirely. As a social worker states:

Look, you can't have someone living at the NuNN who is severely psychotic and turns the whole place upside down. We had a situation like that for a while, and it just kept getting worse. Yeah, that's just not feasible, because I think it's different from another shelter. (...) Of course, no one wants disturbances anywhere, but we [social workers] leave here at five, so after that, the men must work things out among themselves. If there are people who really need psychiatric care, that's not what we're set up for, you know? That's just too complex. (F7)

Another participant reflects on this instance, which clearly signals the need for a self-managed shelter to exclude certain people: *"Take Stephen, for example: at some point, everyone was completely fed up with him and his weird talk. He ended up leaving. (...) At a certain point, he started... I don't know if it was borderline psychosis or if he was actually psychotic, but he started talking more and more nonsense, seeing people who weren't there, and saying he'd set the place on fire..."* (CP2). This is similar for NOIZ, where one location manager recalls excluding an individual who slept at NOIZ: *"There was a psychotic gentleman who was screaming terribly at night. We had to remove him in the middle of the night. It was unpleasant because he was simply unwell. I found it difficult; I wasn't sure if I should really put him out on the street, but it was necessary for the safety of others"* (FM5). This shows that, especially in the self-management programs, selection and exclusion mechanisms are needed to ensure safety and livability. This is common to shelter facilities generally (Akkermans, Oudemans, and Martijn 2023, 33).

Still, this does not necessarily mean that these mechanisms are always employed effectively. For instance, although NuNN has established exclusion mechanisms, the responsibility for their enforcement lies with the participant group. This can sometimes result in individuals being excluded in ways that contradict the service values pursued by the shelter's social workers, or in exclusion mechanisms not being used when they appear necessary to safeguard the functioning of co-production. This signals that inclusion and exclusion mechanisms in co-production structures are necessary but insufficient to enable the co-productions to function well.

In short, all programs entail considerations of manageability to enable sustainable co-production. This relates to how many people participate, but also especially to controlling who can and cannot participate, in order to keep co-production manageable for both frontline staff and participants.

Conclusion

In short, program structures require three essential elements to make co-production work. First, they need a balanced mix of incentives – tangible ones like shelter and money serve as initial motivators, but lasting engagement depends equally on non-material rewards such as personal growth, social connection, and the satisfaction of helping others. Second, programs must create accessible entry points with flexible pathways that match participants' varying abilities while providing meaningful opportunities for development. Finally, mechanisms for both inclusion and exclusion are necessary to maintain safety, order, and a general commitment to the program's rules – especially in self-managed environments where professional support remains limited. This shows that the program designs do not only structure co-production; they also play an important role in enabling it.

The collective capacity and commitment of participant groups need to be enabled by structural program features. But this is not sufficient. For co-production to be successful, groups also need to be supported by frontline staff in order to co-produce in ways that align with a program's intentions.



Chapter 12.

Professional support

As described in previous chapters, professional support is crucial to how co-production processes unfold. Chapter 10 highlighted that co-production depends on the collective capacity of participant groups. While this capacity is partly generated within groups themselves and supported by program structures, it is also actively created through the work of frontline staff.

As discussed in Chapter 6, each program envisions a slightly different role for its professional supporters along the dimensions of the extent of support and the nature of professional supervision, as summarized in Table 12.1. This ideal-typical classification generally holds up well, although in practice, even the more advisory professionals sometimes take on a directive role and intervene when they believe that fundamental underlying values or the overall functioning of the co-production program are at risk.

Table 12.1 Extent and nature of professional support

	Continuous presence	Limited presence
Advisory	Client council	NuNN
Directive	Visitor-volunteers	NOIZ

Regardless of these ideal types, frontline workers in all programs play an active role in supporting co-production. Even in meetings at NuNN and in the client councils – where support is formally consultative – professionals often take on a strong steering role to keep the process going and to ensure that decisions are actually taken. As one client council advisor explains: *“Ideally, I wouldn’t get involved at all. In the LOC [national organization supporting client councils], the support worker’s job description literally says: You should be as lazy as possible. Just sit back and relax. I wish it were true. Yeah. It’s hard work. But that’s why this group has managed to stay together for eight years or so”* (EA1).

While Chapter 9 showed that frontline workers support co-production through structuring, guiding, and intervening, this chapter moves beyond simply describing these activities. It examines how they enable co-production to function successfully in practice.

Although each program takes a different approach, general conditions for facilitating co-production can be identified. In all programs, professionals provide practical and organizational facilitation. Beneath this, they work along three interconnected fronts: building trust, creating commitment, and balancing guidance and restraint. Together, these activities help to generate and sustain the collective capacity on which co-production ultimately depends.

In the next section, I discuss how frontline workers support co-production. This relates to some practical tasks in the facilitation of co-production and, more abstractly, balancing guidance and intervention, and creating mutual commitment to co-production with participants. This, in turn, requires frontline workers to have a shared belief in the value of co-production.

12.1 Practical facilitation of co-production

Frontline professionals play a crucial role in supporting co-production. The most visible part of their work consists of direct, practical support to co-producers and co-production processes. At NuNN, for instance, the staff prepares the residents' meetings, facilitates making next week's schedule of the shifts, and helps participants where needed. Similarly, DRG's drop-in center staff recruits potential visitor-volunteers, provides individual support to co-producers, and makes the schedule that assigns who does what – based on participants' wishes and capacities. At the client councils, professional and voluntary external support workers make minutes of the meetings, communicating these to council members. Furthermore, the drop-in center frontline staff provide practical support to the councils where needed by coordinating communication, organizing meetings, and providing administrative and advisory support. Meanwhile, in the NOIZ self-managed shelter initiative, drop-in center staff assist in selecting and supporting caretakers, monitor adherence to house rules, and address emerging conflicts or individual needs.

Indeed, the meetings at NuNN and the client councils require consistent active support. This involves managing the agenda, facilitating discussions, time management, and trying to create a constructive atmosphere. While these concrete tasks are vital for supporting co-production, when we zoom out, some underlying themes emerge in the frontline work of facilitating co-production, namely:

- Building trust
- Creating commitment
- Balancing co-production with other action prescriptions

12.2 Building trust amid distrust

Previous sections showed that co-production depends on a baseline of trust among participants – both within the group and in the frontline professionals who guide the

process. For NOIZ, a staff member notes that this is an essential task in recruiting caretakers: *“It’s really about building trust”* (FM3). In practice, however, that trust is not always present at the outset: some service users arrive with doubts about whether the organization will protect their interests, whether they will be taken seriously, or whether their contributions matter. Frontline workers, therefore, face the central task of building trust amid distrust. As a NuNN social worker notes: *“You need to be able to handle distrust. It can really get under your skin – I’ve had periods where it felt incredibly heavy. If enough people keep saying things like, ‘Get lost with your nonsense. We’re honestly sick of you, go back to your office and do your own thing. Commit subsidy fraud!’ [Laughs] That can get pretty nasty. It’s tough, because your integrity is questioned”* (F9).

Trust is not only important from the perspective of participants. Frontline workers, too, rely on trust to do their work effectively. First, and most obviously, trust is required because frontline workers need to be able to trust that co-producers can run things themselves. *“[Self-management requires] a lot of trust. Trust in the people who use the shelter and that they can run things themselves. And trust from them in us, as well – that we do what we are supposed to do”* (F6). This is even true for the relatively less demanding visitor-volunteer program, as one drop-in center staff member put it: *“You can’t give that kind of responsibility to just anyone, and that makes sense. You must be able to assess that. For some people, it’s a responsibility they’ll never, ever be able to handle. But for others, it’s exactly what they need. Just saying: I trust you with this”* (F10). At NOIZ, trust is even a key prerequisite used by location managers when selecting participants: *“I cannot entrust anyone with the drop-in center, here”* (FM1).

But beyond this required baseline level of trust, mutual trust also plays a functional role in how co-production unfolds day to day. It allows for low-threshold communication between frontline workers and participants. This is especially crucial in self-management programs, where frontline workers potentially operate at an informational disadvantage. Trusting relationships with service users enable social workers to bridge this gap and pick up on signals from participants. At NuNN, for instance, not everything surfaces during residents’ meetings, but when people feel comfortable enough to speak up during the week, it offers social workers the kind of insight that helps raise issues when collective attention is warranted. As one social worker puts it: *“Often, a lot of things have already been shared with us beforehand, either by someone or just through the grapevine. So yes, if there have been incidents, we’re usually aware of them. Sometimes we hear things like: ‘You have no idea what goes on here in the evenings or over the weekends.’ But the truth is, more often than not, people do share things with us – only in confidence”* (F5).

In short, mutual trust is a cornerstone for successful co-production. This brings us to the question: How can trust be built in these settings, especially when the starting point is often distrust? Three strategies for building trust are used across the four programs, relating to forging individual bonds with service users, organizing activities, and placing trust in participants.

Building personal connections

The first way to build trust is by forming individual connections with service users and participants through informal communication and personal engagement. At NuNN, the social workers adopt a ‘presence approach’ (Baart, 2001). This approach focuses on building trust with service users through forming relational bonds and attuning to service users’ own needs and wishes. It aims to view service users as individuals, rather than clients or through a professional lens. This is visible in how the frontline team approaches the onboarding of interns. During their first weeks, interns do nothing but meet the residents and ‘sit on their hands,’ a social worker explains: *“If you don’t take the time to get to know the men, you won’t build that bond of trust. And if there’s no trust, the work won’t come – because everything we do for them starts from the questions they bring to us”* (F4). Trust is built by ‘just being there, being present,’ a social worker explains: *“Someone who’s homeless is often pretty far removed from society, pushed to the margins. So, it’s a powerful thing to be the one who stays, who keeps standing beside them, who still listens to their story”* (F2).

While DRG’s employees do not explicitly mention doing so, their approach is similar. Drop-in center staff first build relations with members, and try to consider individuals’ needs, wishes, and capacities in how they approach them and potentially recruit them for co-production. Often, that starts with recruiting someone as a visitor-volunteer, but it can also be that people are asked first to become part of the client councils.

During co-production, individual bonds are often formed and maintained. Establishing frequent, informal, and low-threshold contact emerges as an important strategy for building trust across all programs. At NOIZ, for example, one staff member explains: *“I talk to the caretaker every week. If something’s going on, I’ll know about it. But look, they’re not children anymore – we’re not going to hold meetings every month; that would just make them feel patronized”* (F13). A location manager echoes this emphasis on ongoing, informal interaction: *“I trust them completely. In the evenings, we’re often in touch and have almost daily contact with the caretaker. That creates a constant sense of connection”* (F1). Especially at NOIZ, the cultivation of trust through regular, casual contact plays a critical role across the various co-production settings. Rather than

relying on formal mechanisms, trust tends to be nurtured in consistent day-to-day communication and connection.

Organizing social events

A second way to build trust is through the planning of shared activities to increase team building and trust. Across all programs, outings and informal gatherings are regularly organized. *“It helps to do something fun together – share a meal, go laser-tagging – so the relationship isn’t only about solving problems,”* a social worker explains (F5). The same holds true for DRG’s drop-in centers, where a wide variety of activities are organized – ranging from annual sports days to weekly or monthly film screenings, karaoke events, or collective viewings of national football tournaments. Visitor-volunteers are often closely involved in these events, many of which originate from initiatives proposed by users themselves or the client council.

Each location council receives a budget to organize two excursions per year. Furthermore, location managers sometimes organize activities for volunteers or councils. For instance, one location council went to a museum exhibition on homelessness in Amsterdam. In addition to these social events, activities are frequently used to engage with the broader user base and to recruit new council members – such as informal gatherings over pizza, bingo, or other low-threshold meetups in the drop-in centers.

Although such festivities are not centrally organized within NOIZ, individual locations do occasionally initiate them. As one staff member from a drop-in center explains about NOIZ: *“When there’s a birthday – technically alcohol isn’t allowed here, we always make sure someone from our team is there, and we’ll say, ‘Go ahead, have a drink, celebrate your birthday.’ And once we leave, the alcohol must be put away. The caretakers keep a close eye on that, too. Because this place – it matters to them. They don’t want to lose it”* (F12).

Giving trust

Finally, a recurring theme across all frontline staff is the belief that trust must be given in order to grow. A DRG location manager explains: *“How do we show trust? We hand over the keys – even to my ‘sacred’ office – and the bank card in case something comes up. People could run off with it, but almost everyone rises to the responsibility once you place that trust in them”* (FM3). A staff member of another drop-in center voices a similar need: *“In the end, you need to give people trust. If you give trust, they will return it”* (F12).

A social worker at NuNN echoes this sentiment, emphasizing how giving trust can foster a sense of mutuality: *“When residents realize we trust them, you can incidentally*

almost see a spark of pride ignite. It's those kinds of moments, you know that the trust someone is given, and how good that feels to them. And that's always what we try to do: we try to start from a place of good faith" (F6). The same applies to the client council at DRG, where a support worker reflects on the fragile nature of trust in such settings: "I think that's really part of the dynamic... and in these kinds of environments – something I also see in my own work – trust is... well, it's easily damaged and slow to build. But it can be built. So, it's definitely possible, but it does take time, optimism, and patience. And, also, giving people the benefit of the doubt" (EA4).

In sum, the frontline professionals all advocate a deliberate posture of good faith, assuming people's potential for responsibility and trustworthiness – even when they know that there is a realistic chance that it can be broken. In this view, co-production begins by placing trust in service users, allowing them to grow into new roles and relationships.

12.3 Creating mutual commitment

While trust is important in all programs, it is insufficient for successful co-production. As argued in Chapter 10, successful co-production requires the people involved to support the initiative's goals, norms, and values and to be prepared to act upon them – it requires participants' commitment to the values and practices of co-production. This does not arise spontaneously. On the contrary, it presents a real puzzle: how do the frontline workers get a group of service users not only to participate in co-production, but also to do it in a way that reflects the program's ideals? This is, at its core, a question of creating mutual commitment.

The previous chapter on program structures already explored the important role of external, as well as social, incentives in stimulating participants' commitment to co-production practices. In all programs, in some shape or form, extrinsic rewards play a role. Similarly, all programs have selection and exclusion mechanisms. But while these structural elements may stimulate participants to commit to the practices of co-production, they do not automatically make participants internalize the underlying values of a program. To do this, professional strategies are especially important. Across the four programs, we can identify the following professional activities (also see Robertson and Tang 1995) to create this commitment, especially relating to active participant recruitment and socialization.

Recruitment

The first strategy to ensure participants' commitment to co-production revolves around recruitment and selection by professionals. The NOIZ program exemplifies this strategy. Location managers usually select caretakers from a pool of already active visitor-volunteers. Therefore, the drop-in center's professionals are already familiar with participants' character and capacities and can assess their trustworthiness. As discussed, an important consideration in this process is whether someone is deemed reliable and capable. Thereby, the selection process for caretakers serves to select participants only who already align somewhat with the program's goals, values, and norms. As discussed in the previous chapter, this also means excluding participants that have been deemed unsuitable. One of DRG's location managers recalled that, after recurring drinking by two caretakers, she had to exclude them from the program:

This was really right at the very beginning. But, well, you can imagine – two caretakers who are responsible for opening the door, for making sure the shower gets cleaned. I mean, they have to do those things themselves. You want to be able to make agreements with them. If they are out and about and get hammered, and then return late themselves while people are sleeping here. Being loud themselves. Having the occasional argument among themselves while people are trying to sleep. That kind of stuff. You just can't make agreements with that. The idea of NOIZ is that they don't drink or use drugs here. Now, I must say I'm not super strict about that, and I'm well aware that some of those guys have a beer every now and then. As long as things go well, we don't necessarily make an issue of it. But this was so extreme. It clearly wasn't working. Then we told those guys: "This isn't caretaking. This isn't working." So, it wasn't pleasant for a while – they didn't like it either, of course. But peace returned after that. So it was a good choice. (FM4).

The selection strategy is also used to some degree for DRG's visitor-volunteers, where participant selection is in the hands of the drop-in center's professionals, although this mainly relates to actively filtering out people whose behavior is deemed to be fundamentally at odds with a program's intentions.

While at NuNN and the DRG's client council, respondents believe that the commitment of participants, too, mainly depends on participant groups' composition; the professionals do not have a *formal* instrument to select and exclude participants, as this power is in the hands of the service users and the participants.

However, frontline workers do play an important informal role in stimulating service users to become active in co-production, by actively recruiting candidates for the programs. Similarly, they might steer a group toward dismissing someone who does not fit the program in the first place. For instance, at NuNN, frontline workers may actively ask a man requesting shelter at NuNN in the residents' meeting (based on his previous experiences at the shelter) whether this would be a suitable place for him, thereby steering the group to send him away.

Socialization

An essential way in which staff seek to create commitment is through socialization. Socialization firstly relates to socializing (new and older) participants to the practices of co-production. Both location managers and council supporters state that they often send forgetful council members multiple reminders about upcoming meetings – in person, via e-mail, or through text messages. They also do so for visitor volunteers. And at NuNN, where the weekly meetings take place inside the shelter, managers who did not cancel in advance are often called up by telephone. And the social workers often knock on the doors of absent shelter residents to invite them to meetings. As one social worker describes one of the participants' attendance at meetings over months: *"At first, he was hardly present – he just stayed in bed. He wouldn't get up. I kept going to get him, and then he'd show up halfway through the meeting. Now, he's the first who sits at the table."* (F1). In other words, in practice, a great deal of effort goes into motivating participants to commit to the practices of co-production.

Secondly, professionals engaging in co-production aim to socialize participants in the *values* of self-management. As a social worker notes, this requires that frontline staff can engage service users in what co-production entails:

What it is, why it matters, what the goal is, what we're trying to achieve – and that you just keep repeating that. That you help the group recognize their own strength, and that you continue to highlight the positives. That it really is impressive how they keep NuNN running day and night. That the way they make decisions is impressive. You have to acknowledge them for what they do, and help them see: hey, what you're doing is actually quite remarkable. You really have to keep saying that, again and again, because otherwise it might go unnoticed. But in truth, it's something quite unique. (F4)

At NuNN, the residents' meeting serves as the main venue for this work, which is why all of NuNN's social workers refer to it as the *"heart of self-management."* During

these meetings, they repeatedly voice key ideals, using phrases such as “*the street is sacred*” (meaning: do not cause trouble near the shelter), “*everyone deserves a chance*” (emphasizing inclusion and support), and “*the group decides*” (highlighting the importance of collective, democratic decision-making).

One social worker stresses the importance of creating commitment through socialization: “*The only thing you can do (...) is to explain in the residents’ meeting what self-management entails, what belongs to it – and especially what doesn’t*” (SW7). The following excerpt demonstrates how a social worker uses the residents’ meeting to reassert group norms after a week marked by widespread frustration among participants about people failing to show up for their shifts – an issue that had, until then, gone unaddressed in the meeting.

It used to be completely unacceptable not to show up for a shift. I think we need to make it the standard that everyone does their shifts – no exceptions – and that people aren’t getting called out in meetings like this for something we all agreed on. It’s always the same people picking up the slack, and it’s completely ruining the atmosphere. If you’re not willing to put in the effort, then maybe this just isn’t the right role for you. And people act like calling it out is snitching, but it’s not. You sign up for a shift, you show up. Otherwise, go back to being a guest, that’s fine. At least then we’ve got a group that actually wants to pull together. (Observation 8 November 2022)

This example shows how social workers, in the absence of formal authority, seek to set collective norms through persuasion. Rather than disciplining individuals, they aim to realign the group’s shared understanding of the responsibilities involved in co-production. Socialization here functions as a mechanism to build shared norms and, in turn, mutual commitment.

Building this commitment is crucial – as the contrasting examples of lacking commitment in Chapter 10 illustrate – but it is by no means automatic. Participants’ norms may sometimes run counter to the norms aspired to in co-production, as the NuNN participant who earlier noted: “*And what I also struggle with is that – where I come from, if you say something, that’s snitching. So, with my street mentality, I find it hard to navigate this*” (CP4). Creating commitment, then, partly hinges on the art of persuading participants to embrace certain core norms – such as bringing serious issues to the table in meetings – without imposing them so rigidly that the autonomy the program seeks to foster is undermined.

A second example, in Box 12.1 below, reveals another dimension of this process. In a particularly charged residents' meeting, social workers ask about the eviction of a guest who was rumored to have a background as a (child) sex offender. Although the social workers do not intervene in the group's decision, they initiate a process of reflection on whether the action taken aligns with one of the shelter's foundational principles: that everyone deserves a second chance. The dialogue that unfolds demonstrates how social workers use socialization not to override participant autonomy, but to encourage norm clarification and moral reasoning within the group:

Box 12.1 The point of NuNN

The point of NuNN

Emily brings up a guest who stayed at the NuNN for a few weeks but was evicted last week. According to the group, they pulled him from his bed after rumors started circulating about child pornography. There's talk of an ex-wife who had said things, something about images he might have had, and so on.

On top of that, he had apparently done things while at the NuNN that made people not want him there.

Peter says the guest made strange sexual advances and said disturbing things, like fiddling with the bathroom door while someone was inside and asking if he could join. He concludes: *"You have no idea how fucking sick that midget is."*

At this point, multiple people explain why they feel they had to evict the guest.

Emily adds: *"I now understand that you didn't feel safe and banned him. But we just wanted to know: was it certain, or was it just a rumor? Because you can't throw someone out on the street based on hearsay."*

Olivia agrees, saying she understands now, but at first, she was worried someone had been kicked out of NuNN based on vague suspicions.

Noah cuts in: *"But seriously, aren't we self-managed!? Then what we did should be allowed, right?"*

Olivia: *"Let me finish. The first rumor was about a photo with his wife, from before he even got here. Sure, we might all have an opinion about that, but I think some of us sitting here have done things in the past, too. I don't think people should be judged solely on that. That's just how I see it."*

Noah: *"Bullshit. Don't you want to know who you're dealing with? With all those photos and everything?"*

Olivia: *"But that's something that came up during his stay. The point of NuNN isn't to punish people for things they did before they got here."*

Noah adds: *"Well, up to a point."*

Luke: *"Yes, in principle that's true – up to a point."*

Noah: *“Exactly, that’s what I’m saying. I’m not judging someone for having been in prison or something, but there’s a line. Yours might just be further out than mine.”*

Olivia: *“It’s not even that for me – I’m using this case as an example to show we need to be careful with how we handle these things.”*

Noah: *“Look, that crazy guy who broke into the Apple Store? Fine by me. But when it comes to kids, that’s the line. There are other people living here, too. Maybe I keep my cool, but someone else might stab him.”*

Emily: *“Then I’ve got a question: [other shelter] is asking whether there’s a timeframe after which he might be allowed back in.”*

The group, unanimously, says he is no longer welcome.

Emily, Luke, and Olivia are social workers; Peter and Noah are volunteers.

Although the final decision – expulsion – remains in place, the value of the exchange lies in the opportunity it creates for participants to reflect on the shelter’s mission critically. It allowed residents to interrogate NuNN’s core purpose and to search for common ground. One side invoked the program’s credo to not judge people based on their pasts, while another invoked self-management to legitimize the group’s capacity to act. The debate did not resolve that tension, but it did weave the two principles together and clarified where the collective boundary now lies.

Building commitment through socialization is more visible at NuNN than anywhere else, yet similar moments surface in the other programs. Clientcouncil meetings, for instance, are fertile ground for norm alignment: the external advisor, and, at times, council members themselves, will remind quarrelling participants that they should be speaking on behalf of the wider user base, that they should speak respectfully to one another. And about the visitor-volunteer program, for instance, a location manager explains how they try to maintain a culture of equality in the drop-in centers: *“Some visitor-volunteers start to feel superior to the other visitors. That’s something our team keeps pushing back against. We keep saying: no, we’re all equal here. You’re not a bit better just because you’re the one behind the bar and someone else isn’t”* (FM1).

All in all, trust and mutual commitment can lead to a sense that co-production is truly a collective endeavor – something done together, with shared identification in the goals and underlying values of co-production.

12.4 Balancing co-production with other requirements

On the one hand, stimulating co-production is a matter of stepping back. It involves relinquishing responsibilities and placing initiative in the hands of participants. But at the same time, it requires a great deal of hard and persistent work to get people to that point. Stimulating co-production, in this sense, involves a dual responsibility: actively facilitating the process while also allowing participants enough autonomy to make their own choices – including decisions professionals might view as mistakes, or approaches that differ from what they themselves would prefer. As one social worker at NuNN puts it: *“Self-management also requires patience, I think, because it means having less control over what’s happening. You really need to be patient and trust that things will unfold”* (F8).

The balancing act between guidance and restraint is present in all programs, regardless of the role of professional support envisioned in the program structure. In this process, frontline workers must constantly weigh different action prescriptions (Evans and Hupe 2020, 6). Promoting user empowerment needs to be balanced with core service values, such as ensuring safety, fairness, justice, and feasibility. Additionally, workers must attend to basic organizational constraints – including workload, staffing, safety regulations, and budgetary limits – especially when users, like at NuNN or DRG’s client councils, make decisions that have practical implications for daily operations.

At NOIZ, caretakers appear to benefit from an approach that balances guidance with trust: supporting them without sliding into control. As one location manager explains: *“In the beginning, we had this little logbook where caretakers would write down whether the night had gone well, or anything like that. But that started to feel too much like a homeless shelter or night shift kind of vibe, so we stopped that pretty quickly”* (FM2). A drop-in center staff member also describes learning to let go: *“The unfinished edges are actually part of what makes it work. I could say I’d prefer our caretaker to follow the rules more closely. But it’s also kind of nice that he doesn’t, you know? So I think that too”* (F10).

One of DRG’s location managers reflects on how she aims to balance the wish to honor the location council’s proposals with her own responsibilities as the manager of staff and volunteers.

Box 12.2 Pick your battles**Pick your battles**

I really do try to honor most of their requests. I also try not to fall into that mindset of, *“Oh god, we’ve done this before,”* or *“This is way too complicated.”* But I do choose my battles. If something comes up and I think, guys, this is going to be too much for us, then I have to consider the whole location – our volunteers, our staff. It’s always a bit of a balancing act: running the center while also trying to accommodate what the visitors or the council want. That said, I’ve also learned that their ideas are often quite good.

Take this one recent example. We have a suggestion box. And someone had dropped in a note that simply said: I want omelets. Now, if one visitor just walks up to me and says, I want omelets, my first instinct is: ‘Come on, pal – we already serve bread, grilled cheese, and a hot lunch every day. Give me a break.’ But the council took the note seriously. They put their foot down and said: We want to try this.

So I said, Okay, but then someone from the council needs to help make it happen. Because from my end, this turns into a logistical thing: I need to get eggs, bread, and find an extra volunteer to do the cooking – on an already tight schedule. And you know what? They did it. One of them stepped up, and now it’s part of the routine. Every Friday morning, we make omelets. We skip the grilled cheese for a day, and it works fine.

I’ve learned not to react with, Oh no, more work, this won’t fly. Sometimes it really does work out. Of course, sometimes I still have to say: Hold up – maybe this isn’t the top priority right now. But it’s a great dynamic. A real collaboration. And in the end, we all want to make things better together. As long as that stays front and center, I’m happy to go along with a lot and collaborate with them. And of course, that is also what I am supposed to do. (FM6)

This anecdote shows how she handles this by (i) taking the initiative seriously, (ii) making participants aware of the organizational challenges involved, and (iii) facilitating the idea – but only if council members also take responsibility. As she emphasizes, such an approach works well as long as everyone shares the commitment to improve things together – in other words: when there is a baseline of mutual commitment among council members. In doing so, she balances the drop-in center’s workload with the council’s wishes.

At NuNN, with its emphasis on consultative support, social workers place more emphasis on restraint. As one respondent puts it, social workers *“really need to be able to sit on their hands, to be patient, to deal with setbacks. Because honestly, you sometimes find yourself thinking: what a chaotic mess this is – these people can’t do anything. But then you have to shift gears and remind yourself: okay, these people have other things on their minds, this isn’t important to them right now. This is your perspective, because this is how you were raised. You know? You always have to pause and reflect on that”* (F6). This reflection underscores that a belief in co-production does not necessarily imply blind faith in participants’ capabilities or reliability. Rather, it requires holding space for uncertainty and difference; trusting the process even when outcomes deviate from professional expectations. At the same time, frontline workers intervene when they suspect that core values are at stake, as the residents’ meeting fragment below illustrates:

Box 12.3 Then I don’t need to work here anymore

Then I don’t need to work here anymore

A man introduces himself at the residents’ meeting. He turns out to be an old acquaintance who left on bad terms, but managed to get into the shelter during the weekend and wishes to stay here. The social workers explain to the newer members of the group that the man was involved in threatening another resident with a knife.

Luke lashes out at the longtime participants who should have known about this incident, and in his opinion, should not have allowed him into the shelter: *“This is about your safety. To be honest, I was flabbergasted when I found out that he was here.”* Olivia adds that: *“If you guys are okay with him being here, then I don’t need to work here anymore.”*

The residents, however, seem rather indifferent to these strong statements.

Emily steps in: *“He probably gave you guys something again...”* – implying that he may have bribed some of the residents with drugs.

A few weeks later, a social worker told me in an interview that, at this moment, she sent a text in the social workers’ group chat saying that they should take on a more reserved role again and let the group make a decision about this – the social workers have done more than enough in making their opinion clear.

When the group votes a few minutes later on whether the man may stay in the shelter longer, the group votes that he cannot.

Luke, Olivia, and Emily are social workers

This example shows that, even when professional support is limited and consultative, frontline workers do step in when core service values, such as safety, are at risk. All in all, a central part of the work lies in balancing, on the one hand, the encouragement of participant agency and responsibility, and on the other, safeguarding the process and ensuring that its outcomes do not contradict other organizational values and requirements.

12.5 Frontline beliefs and commitment

Having explored what frontline staff *do*, we now turn to the beliefs entangled with their actions. Supporting co-production depends on professionals holding a shared understanding of what co-production is and why it matters. As one NuNN social worker puts it: *“I think it’s crucial that we, as the frontline team, share a clear understanding of what self-management entails – especially because we’re the only stable, consistent presence in the shelter”* (F4).

At NuNN, the shared belief in co-production – in the form of self-management – is the strongest. The frontline team holds a coherent and collectively supported vision regarding the content, value, and limitations of self-management. This functions as a practice ideology (Hasenfeld 2010, 30) that guides their work in the shelter. Their perspective includes a consistent view, including the problem-definition of homelessness, how self-management can contribute to solutions, its value, its possible limitations and challenges, and the role of social workers in this process. The social workers’ core idea behind NuNN’s approach to self-management is that participants are enabled to create the best possible service for themselves. As one social worker explains: *“For me, self-management means that people can shape their shelter in a way that suits them: what rules are important, that they have voting rights when it comes to things that need to happen. That can be about sanctions, it can be about policy decisions. It is really from A to Z. They can shape their shelter into the best possible place for them”* (F1). Thereby, self-management can contribute to the broader goals of the shelter. As one social worker describes: *“Providing people with a warm, comfortable place where they can also be meaningful to others, regain a sense of self-worth, and use that as a stepping stone back into society”* (F6).

The social workers adhere to a few core principles regarding how self-management should be implemented in practice. These principles are embedded in the structure of the co-production program and the house rules. Key aspects include the importance of collective decision-making by participants, the responsibility of participants for

running services and shaping both their individual and collective experience within the shelter, ensuring that they do not cause disturbances in the neighborhood, maintaining safety, and offering new guests and volunteers the opportunity to participate. Furthermore, a fundamental rule is that all rules must fit on a single A4 sheet. While these rules can be altered, they serve as stable guiding principles for the social workers.

Self-management is so central to the social workers that it shapes how they see their professional role. The social workers see it as their core task to facilitate and preserve self-management. This involves a radical emphasis on empowering participants through democratic decision-making and responsibility. This means participants' decisions can conflict with social workers' preferences: *"We are there to support, but we have no voting rights, and we must conform to the outcome of the vote. That can be tough because it may not be the outcome you had hoped for, but you still go along with it because that is self-management"* (F2)

This vision is shared across the entire team, although there are slight differences between social workers' attitudes. Some are more inclined to intervene when things seem to be going off track, while others take a more hands-off approach: *"The negative aspects, such as favoritism in groups, where as a support worker you may have little influence – that is something one person might find easier to accept than another"* (F4). While the social workers are aware of the occasional downsides and shortcomings of co-production, all professionals take pride in their approach to service provision, as one social worker reflects: *"Although I know it has enough pitfalls, it has been working for 26 years. (...) It goes against all the stigma that everyone thinks they are useless and that if you become homeless, you are not fully capable. But they can actually run a shelter by themselves. I mean, that does not happen anywhere else"* (F6).

At DRG's programs, the professionals supporting co-production also express positive beliefs about the ideals of the programs. Unlike at NuNN, though, co-production in the drop-in centers does not serve as the staff's guiding principle to their work, but rather is seen as a pragmatic way to improve service provision, rather than an almost ideological view that is more present at NuNN.

That does not change the fact that there are clear ideas about the content and value of co-production, and that many staff members believe strongly in user involvement. DRG's drop-in center staff and location managers are enthusiastic about the visitor-volunteer program because it builds a culture of involvement and shared responsibility. *"We're hoping for a lot of participation from visitors,"* one worker said, *"and I think this makes people feel more responsible for the place. And that works really well"* (F10). Frontline staff see

this kind of participation as more than just practical help; it changes the way visitors relate to the drop-in centers: when people take part in small tasks, like wiping down tables, they start to feel a sense of ownership, and when they feel responsible for a place, they are less likely to leave a mess behind and are more likely to address other people in terms of misbehavior. Thereby, staff believe that the visitor-volunteer program creates a more cooperative atmosphere between the service providers and users. As a drop-in center staff member states: *“If you give people responsibility and make them feel valuable, they will act accordingly. I believe that this is the way to run a drop-in center”* (F10).

The perceived value of the program not only benefits the drop-in centers but the participants as well. Frontline staff highlight how valuable the program is in giving visitors a sense of purpose, structure, and team belonging: *“I really like that we give people the chance to be part of a team. To do something useful”* (F11).

Another highlights the perceived value of the visitor-volunteer program:

Look, these are literally people who go unseen on the streets. People who are invisible, who often have no real place in society. And by being allowed to work here, they finally get that place. So often, especially with people who are right on the edge – who are about to let their lives spiral completely out of control – if you step in and say, ‘Hey, I don’t think this is going well. I can offer you this opportunity, but I need to see that you’re actually going to take it,’ that can make all the difference. (...) And I really believe that’s the driving force behind so much of what we do – this idea that it matters. And that’s what gets people out of bed in the morning. That’s what keeps them from drinking. That’s what makes them take care of themselves – because if you’re going to stand behind a bar at [drop in center], you need to show up looking somewhat put together. So yeah, I think it’s incredibly important. (F10)

Staff believe that, over time, participation in the visitor-volunteer program serves as more than a daily routine. *“It’s a way to slowly reintegrate into regular society,”* a staff member explains. *“To eventually find a normal job again. To show up on time, stick to agreements, and communicate when you can’t make it or are running late”* (F11). At the same time, respondents recognize that not everyone joins with long-term goals in mind. For some – especially those without documentation or those who are not able to pursue formal work – the program is simply a practical way to earn a little money. But regardless of their reasons for participating, the staff believes that the visitor-volunteer program is mutually beneficial.

DRG's client councils are mainly supported by the visitors' council's professional advisor and the volunteers who take notes and/or serve as advisors of the location councils. All these interviewed supporters portray a strong belief in the value of user involvement in organizational decision-making and cite it as a reason for applying for the work: *"I just think the real question is how to get people to participate as much as possible – whether it's residents having a say in how their neighborhood should look or homeless people contributing ideas about how the drop-in center should operate. I just think that's important. That, as a user, you have a voice in shaping the things that directly affect you"* (EA3).

At least as important for the councils' functioning are the organizational staff who interact with the councils. And at the local drop-in center levels, staff and location managers are also actively involved in supporting the council and, importantly, collaborating with them. An effective collaboration depends on the staff's belief in the value of user involvement. All interviewed location managers portray a belief in the value of the client councils in theory. Nevertheless, multiple drop-in center managers do have reservations about how the council often operates in practice. In an internal survey, the nine responding location managers rated the quality of participation in the site council at an average of 3.25 out of 5. While they see council members as engaged, present, and offering reasonable advice, the main concern is the weak representation of and responsiveness to the drop-in centers' daily users. Complaints include discussions veering into irrelevant topics, insufficient advocacy for the interests of the intended constituents, a focus on personal agendas, and some council members not spending enough time at the drop-in center. While location managers recognize the personal benefits for individual participants, they do not see this as the program's intended goal. As one manager put it: *"Sometimes you just spend an hour chatting. Not in this case, though, because now we have a good location council. But in the past, you'd think, 'Yeah, that was really a waste of my time.' Still, I'm glad they all feel heard and seen. So, then it's more about just listening to them"* (FM1).

In contrast, everyone involved in the NOIZ program – from drop-in center staff and location managers to social workers – is enthusiastic about the comparatively young NOIZ initiative. A drop-in center staff member states: *"I think it's a fantastic idea. I fully support it. I truly believe it's brilliant. It's a brilliant innovation. It was an empty space, and now it's being put to good use. You're helping people. I think it's a really good thing"* (F12). Professionals' enthusiasm about the program in theory extends to its practical implementation: *"All those NOIZ locations are just completely full everywhere. There's clearly a real need for them, and they just work very well. So honestly, I'm really happy about it"* (FM1).

Commitment in the face of doubt

Still, it should be clear that most frontline workers do not romanticize co-production. Most can list its virtues, but also its drawbacks: meetings that drag on, nepotism, peer pressure, or uneven workloads. Yet they remain committed – not because they trust every individual or friction-free outcomes, but because they believe the program itself is worth the trouble.

For example, NuNN's social workers described some participants as 'manipulative' or 'expert liars.' And one of DRG's drop-in center managers states that while she has full trust in the location's team of caretakers, this trust does not necessarily extend to all service users: *"Sure, I tend to trust people quickly. But still, you know who you're dealing with. If something gets stolen, I always tell my colleagues: 'Guys, know where you are. If I walk in, leave my phone on the table, and it's gone? That's my own fault – opportunity makes the thief'"* (FM1).

What becomes clear across these accounts is that frontline workers' belief in service users is neither unconditional nor always personal. Instead, their behavior is often guided by a normative commitment to co-production itself. Even when professionals doubt whether specific individuals can be trusted, or whether a group can be trusted to make the right decisions, they believe in adhering to the model. For instance, one of NuNN's frontline workers reflected on what happens when the group makes decisions that the professionals themselves find questionable:

Box 12.4 Same story all over again

Same story all over again

I've gained some experience over time, so I'm not easily shocked anymore. But it's especially important to speak up when a decision is being made about something you care about, and when you would have preferred a different outcome. I think the support staff are listened to. Our opinions are valued – but they're not always followed, and then you just have to accept that.

It already starts with things like: who gets a manager's housing placement when one becomes available. That's something the volunteers decide among themselves. We don't have any say in that. But when things go wrong in the housing, it's the support staff who are the first ones there, who have to step in, who get complaints from the neighbors.

Could we influence those decisions informally? Sure. We could say: this guy doesn't have any kind of benefit, so he won't be able to pay. But even then, the group might still decide to let him go. We had someone, for example, who's known for always doing the same thing when he gets a place – he brings in sex

workers and rents the place out so they can receive clients there. We warned the group about this. And he still got a chance. And what happened was exactly what we expected. Because of this, he was sanctioned and brought back to NuNN. And six months later, he got another shot in a different housing unit – same story all over again.

So yes, it's frustrating that they did not follow our advice. But on the other hand, how important is it to keep offering people in a hopeless situation another chance? I think that's the key. You keep giving people another and another and another chance to try and make something of it. And if they need help along the way, that help should be there. (F1)

Yet while the frontline worker stresses the importance of trust, his account suggests that what ultimately guides his work is less trust in specific individuals than a commitment to the idea of second chances and to the co-production process itself – even when it predictably leads to failure.

Conclusion

Across all programs, frontline workers play an active and indispensable role in making co-production work. They perform practical facilitation tasks, such as organizing meetings, supporting individual participants, coordinating shifts, resolving conflicts, and ensuring the group stays on track. Yet more fundamentally, they operate on three core fronts: building trust, fostering mutual commitment, and balancing guidance with restraint.

This only works when there are clear and shared understandings of the value and ideals underpinning co-production. This belief need not be naïve or idealized; rather, it should reflect a normative commitment to a realistic understanding of co-production – believing in its value, without denying its potential risks and downsides.

This highlights that co-production is not only shaped by participants and frontline workers, but also fundamentally depends on the broader organizational context in which it is embedded. The next section explores how organizations and their environment can create an environment conducive to co-production.



Chapter 13.

Organizational conditions

Professionals who facilitate co-production operate within organizations. The structural conditions shaping the work of frontline staff strongly influence the context in which they act. A significant part of these conditions is determined at the organizational level, which in turn is influenced by its environment. How do the organizations shape conditions to get co-production with vulnerable citizens off the ground?

In this chapter, I ask how organizations create the conditions that allow co-production with vulnerable citizens to take root and endure. The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, I examine how the organizations directly resource the co-production programs through budgets, training, facilities, and infrastructural support. Second, I show how they shape frontline conditions – such as autonomy, staffing, and continuity – that make frontline work conducive to co-production. Third, I analyze how program–organization structures, organizational missions, and cultures, provide conditions for co-production. Finally, I examine how the relations between programs and their (organizational) environment facilitate co-production.

13.1 Resourcing co-production

Co-production in the programs studied depends heavily on the everyday conditions organizations create for frontline workers and co-producers. This first relates to direct, practical support to co-production by providing resources for co-production; the second to infrastructural resources provided on the background.

Directly provided resources

The first form of practical support involves direct resources that organizations provide to the co-production program and the participants. The tangible support involves the provision of monetary incentives, and the budget, training, and facilities provided immediately to a co-production program. At DRG, every visitor-volunteer and each member of a client council receives a modest stipend for every shift or meeting, while caretakers in the larger NOIZ pilot *Stopera* project were compensated with supermarket vouchers.

The next form of support is facilitating training for co-production participants. NuNN and NOIZ require co-producers to obtain the national certificate in first aid and fire safety, with course fees paid by the organization. Furthermore, DRG provides a budget for visitor-volunteers and council members to receive training. For instance, visitor-volunteers at some places had the opportunity to follow training

on aggression management in order to deal with potential aggression in the drop-in centers. Council members have had the opportunity to follow training in the principles of client participation and effective deliberation. At the client council at DRG, the practical support extends to hiring two independent external advisors to the higher-level councils.

Thirdly, the organizations provide budgets for social activities for co-producers. Local budgets exist for social activities – bowling nights, collective football screenings, shared birthday meals – intended to strengthen informal ties between users and staff. Material tokens help as well: visitor-volunteers and council members at some sites receive branded hoodies or other workwear that make their role visible and foster team identity. In combination, such monetary incentives, funded training, professional back-up, and team-building allowances provide the resources to support co-production.

Infrastructural resources

Organizations also provide infrastructural, backstage conditions that make co-production possible. This includes facilities management (e.g., renting meeting rooms for client council meetings), as well as permits and (fire) safety measures. For example, when DRG introduced NOIZ, it had to obtain permits to use the drop-in centers overnight and to adapt the fire alarm systems. In practice, co-production expenses frequently sit on the organization's own budget: DRG allocates roughly €100,000 per year to client councils despite not being legally required to do so, and NOIZ was launched without external financing or payments from participants; the start-up costs and operational costs are borne by the organization.

At NuNN, such infrastructural tasks are largely carried out by the supporting organization, RIBW, which functions as an institutional backbone. It provides HR and payroll administration and sickleave management. Financially, it handles budgeting, subsidy negotiations and administration, and can bridge temporary shortfalls when municipal funding is not fully cost-covering. RIBW also manages facilities and property (leasing the manager apartments and maintenance contracts, safety and permitting procedures) and insurance, and supplies the IT infrastructure. Finally, the Executive Board of RIBW serves as the formal, legally responsible authority in case of incidents. These resources, however, do not substantially differ from what the organization provides to its other shelters that are not selfmanaged.

13.2 Shaping frontline conditions conducive to co-production

Beyond this immediate support, the organizations also enable co-production by shaping frontline conditions that are conducive to co-production. This mainly relates to enabling discretionary autonomy, staffing geared to co-production, and enabling staff continuity.

Autonomy with organizational support

Frontline staff in both organizations report wide latitude to run daytoday operations and shape co-production. As a NuNN social worker puts it: *“The director gives us the freedom to work how we want. He thinks it’s fine that we do what we do, and we feel supported”* (F2). A DRG location manager similarly notes: *“Of course, there are frameworks and policies, but we have a lot of freedom to shape our work the way we see fit. And my manager is always there for us if needed – even in the evenings”* (FM1).

This combination of autonomy and support is crucial in at least two ways. First, at NuNN, selfmanagement allows participants to make decisions that may run counter to immediate organizational interests (e.g., electing managers whom frontline workers consider ill-suited, with potential reputational risks for RIBW). Frontline workers, therefore, need both discretion and organizational backing to navigate the balance between user empowerment and other considerations.

Second, at DRG, each location manager selects NOIZ caretakers, which sometimes includes appointing people with addiction whom they nonetheless judge capable of fulfilling the role. This enables drop-in centers to tailor NOIZ to local conditions, retain control over the process, and make reasoned deviations from general organizational policies. For instance, it is widely acknowledged internally that some NOIZ locations occasionally accommodate more people than the program formally prescribes. As this quote of the director illustrates, supporting co-production requires guardrails without stifling the autonomy of the individual drop-in centers: *“There is always the drive: if it goes well with seven, then maybe eight? And if that goes well: nine, ten, or eleven. Before you know it, it becomes unmanageable. I also know exceptions are made; I’m not exactly sure whether the maximum is always kept to... or rather: I do know it isn’t. But there has to be a boundary somewhere”* (M4). This suggests that to support co-production, the organization provides frontline autonomy, while bounding it with guardrails with an eye on sustainability and manageability of the initiative.

Staffing and selection geared to co-production

A second way in which the organizations enable co-production is by orienting their staffing policies toward it – and, in NuNN's case, by allowing the frontline to play a central role in doing so. Both organizations enable co-production by embedding it in their staffing policies. In both cases, the facilitation of user participation is written directly into job descriptions, yet the mechanics differ. At NuNN, virtually every hiring decision is centered around the question of how well a candidate can function in the self-managed shelter. Frontline workers themselves select new colleagues, in collaboration with participants. Furthermore, from the very start, NuNN deliberately chose to hire staff with a higher vocational educational background and provide relatively high compensation. This was a strategic decision to ensure continuity and attract staff with the capacity to operate independently. Because the board acted on a voluntary basis, the frontline workers had to be capable of managing the organization's daily operations, overseeing complex situations, and representing the initiative in municipal meetings, as the first voluntary chair of the Board overseeing NuNN recalled:

I also arranged for them [the frontline workers] to be paid as much as staff members in an institutional setting. Because I felt we needed good workers who wouldn't leave quickly. I did that with a purpose because they have to be capable of so much: they have to be able to set something up if things go wrong, they have to attend municipal meetings – because as a voluntary board member, I wasn't paid and couldn't spend all my time on that. So those workers had to be able to oversee that. (...) At other night shelters, workers received little more than the minimum wage. (R6)

At DRG, job profiles are drafted centrally – with input from the client council. For example, the job description of location managers states that the candidate should “*stimulate user participation*.” During interviews, candidates are also asked to spell out concrete strategies for involving visitors in the daily life of the drop-in center. To ensure the user perspective is central to the selection process, since 2020 a member of the specific location council (or the visitors' council in the case of a new center) is generally an advising member of the recruitment committee for new location managers.²⁰

²⁰ Even so, there are obstacles to this in practice. Internal documents show instances where the visitors' council voiced complaints that representing visitors were recruited outside of the formal council lines or too late in the process.

Thereby, both organizations seek to enable co-production by (enabling the frontline workers to) focus hiring decisions partly on whether candidates fit the organizational co-production approach.

Staff continuity and internal mobility

Both organizations foster staff continuity, resulting in relatively long tenures and stable teams that know their client groups well. At NuNN, integration into the RIBW has opened career paths and combination roles (for example, combining work at NuNN with ambulatory support work or a team coordinator position elsewhere in the organization). This internal mobility allows workers to develop professionally without leaving NuNN – something that would likely have been more limited had NuNN remained a standalone shelter. Being part of a larger organization also provides access to a broader substitute pool that can step in when needed. This buffer sustains staff continuity and enables NuNN to recruit replacements from within, often staff who previously worked or interned at NuNN but are now employed elsewhere in the RIBW. In sum, continuity, internal mobility, and organizational buffers help preserve program memory, trust, and relational capital, and reduce the fragility that small, self-managed programs typically face when key staff leave.

These forms of support and the resulting conditions do not arise automatically. The next section, therefore, examines the organizational structures, cultures, and missions that entangle them and help facilitate longer-term commitment to co-production.

13.3 Program-organization structures: autonomy, coordination, risk-bearing

This starts with the organizational structures in which the programs are embedded. Comparing NuNN within RIBW to the drop-in centers within DRG, we observe two fundamentally different strategies – one of decoupled autonomy, the other of integrated coordination. Both approaches are conducive to co-production, but through different mechanisms.

NuNN is frequently described as an ‘island’ within the RIBW. The supporting organization mainly provides backstage support, while largely refraining from intervening in NuNN’s internal, selfmanaged way of working. Substantively, NuNN thus enjoys much autonomy. As one social worker put it: *“Contact is minimal. We’re a bit of an odd one out – and we want to be. The director gives us the space to do what we do, and*

we feel supported. The relationship is very good, but minimal. I get my salary from RIBW every month, but beyond that I have little to do with it” (SW2).

This autonomy traces back to NuNN’s origins as an independent shelter that operated under a small foundation with a supervisory board – chaired, on personal title, by someone who was RIBW director at that time. When NuNN was incorporated into RIBW in 2006, it was agreed that NuNN would retain its distinctiveness and autonomy. According to a long-serving social worker, it was even laid down in writing that managers would not interfere with NuNN’s internal selfmanagement processes, and that only the Executive Board would act as a formal counterpart in the event of conflict. Although this document can no longer be located, the arrangement is still followed in practice.

Structured contact is therefore limited to three annual meetings in which the RIBW director and the NuNN team review goals, budgets, and financial results. Additional strategic matters are handled informally between the account manager and a social worker, chiefly to ensure compliance with municipal targets on bed occupancy and average length of stay. In brief, RIBW carries formal legal and financial liability, while NuNN maintains operational discretion.

DRG adopts the converse strategy: hierarchies are flattened and organizational layers tightly coupled. Site-manager job descriptions now require substantial on-floor presence; a monthly cross-site meeting, chaired by the manager of all drop-in centers, aligns activities and addresses the three co-production programs as needed. That manager also meets the visitors’ council monthly. In addition, the statutory director attends the Central Council and the Visitors’ and Participants’ Councils each quarter. A location manager discusses the resulting proximity: *“The director really knows the visitor volunteers at my drop-in center. I think that’s quite special for such a large organization” (FM3).*

Budgets are set centrally, yet spending decisions are largely devolved to individual centers. Some service metrics (e.g., unique visitors) are reported for municipal accountability, but the specifics of co-production remain internally focused. Co-production practices are thus woven into DRG’s ordinary governance routines rather than cordoned off.

To summarize, in both cases, the (supporting) organization negotiates subsidies, bears the financial and legal risk, and is formally accountable, while still granting room for co-production on the floor. Both organizations enable co-production, though in different ways. As we will explore shortly, an important difference is where

the impulse for co-production resides. At NuNN, it is bottom-up and culturally rooted within the shelter, largely decoupled from the RIBW. At DRG, however, it is also explicitly encouraged and structurally embedded by the organization's management and mission. In short, NuNN relies on protected autonomy in order to co-produce, while DRG's approach hinges on integrated support.

13.4 Alignment with the organizational mission and culture

These organizational structures are closely related to the organizational mission and culture. The enablement of co-production importantly seems to hinge on its alignment with the organizational culture and mission.

NuNN: Self-management as identity

NuNN's mission statement is to serve as a *“self-managed night shelter for homeless people, where residents themselves are responsible for the daily functioning of the shelter, enabling them to take an active role and be meaningful to their peers, which contributes to a stronger sense of self-worth”* (RIBW-NR 2025). Because the shelter is structurally decoupled from its parent organization, this mission is mirrored in a distinct organizational culture that differs markedly from the wider RIBW culture. Put simply, self-management forms the core of NuNN's identity since its foundation, shaping both its official vision and its everyday practices.

This culture is informal, trust-based, and minimally formalized. The team functions as a self-directed unit; on paper no hierarchy exists among social workers, though seniority and experience with self-management do create informal differences. Social workers are quite adverse of (deemed) unnecessary hierarchy, bureaucracy, and instead fully believe in the importance of letting service users shape their own services through self-management. One social worker captures this culture in the following quote: *“At first NuNN looks like chaos, but you soon realize how organized it really is. You grow into the place. You learn the rules and norms of our little ‘NuNN world’ by doing – nothing is laid out in manuals, nor does RIBW interfere. Over time you simply acquire the knowledge and are trained to support the shelter by working alongside colleagues who have been here longer”* (F4).

Self-management is therefore deeply embedded in the organizational culture. This culture is actively facilitated by the autonomy that RIBW grants NuNN. As the RIBW director explains, *“It is crucial that everyone who works there operates from a specific culture, from a specific mission and vision – and that is called self-management”* (M1).

Although NuNN's culture and structure remain highly independent, they do not fundamentally conflict with the RIBW's broader mission, which emphasizes recovery, autonomy, self-direction and participation for people with severe psychiatric conditions (RIBW-NR 2025). As the director remarks: *"NuNN did not choose RIBW by accident; there is significant common ground"* (M1). The arms-length structural agreement set out in the previous section allows NuNN to preserve self-management as its organizational identity, while an underlying broad value similarity provides sufficient alignment to satisfy the parent organization.

DRG: Pragmatism, risk-tolerance, and deliberate user involvement

DRG's mission is *"to be there for people in Amsterdam and surrounding areas who are in difficulty and have nowhere else to turn; we mobilize to strength of society so that they can participate as independently as possible"* (De Regenboog Groep 2025). Its mission statement adds that the organization believes in the human dignity of people with complex problems, such as people experiencing homelessness, and that *"we do not coddle; we encourage people to take the reins (back) into their hands"* (Ibidem). The organization explicitly cites the NOIZ program as an illustration of this. Thereby, the organization sees co-production as integral to the organizational identity it espouses.

Across the drop-in centers, staff describe DRG's culture to be user-oriented, non-hierarchical, and strongly pragmatic. Over roughly two decades, DRG has moved from a caretaking ethos to systematic user involvement, as the manager of drop-in centers recalls:

In the past, many volunteers – often older and driven by a caregiving mindset – preferred to serve coffee to visitors, even pre-mixing milk and sugar because otherwise it would just get messy (...). As we began to focus more on what guests could do themselves, that approach began to clash with our evolving vision. Helping shifted from pouring people coffee to offering them the chance to serve others themselves and be thanked in return (...). The funny thing with these kinds of developments is that you initially think you have developed a new vision of what helping actually means. And later, when you zoom out, it becomes clear that this is in fact almost a reflection of the broader zeitgeist, with many other organizations adopting similar perspectives centered on self-direction and self-reliance – not as a disguised cost-cutting exercise, but as something genuinely driven by substantive concerns (M3)

The organization took deliberate steps to increase the provision of responsibility and influence to service users, encouraging them to contribute to their personal development. It increased its emphasis on client councils and the visitor-volunteer model. According to the director, these forms of co-production also actively altered the culture throughout the organization:

I think [co-production at DRG] really requires a lot of tolerance for different kinds of behavior. And that's not just from the people attending the meetings, but it also demands something from the finance department. For example, when the treasurer picks up cash or attendance fees, that just looks different than when you or I do it. So if you impose the same standards as you would for staff, it simply won't work. (M4)

Aside from this client-oriented culture, respondents also claim that the culture is characterized by pragmatism and risk-tolerance. A location manager explains why she believes that NOIZ was developed and eventually scaled throughout the organization: *"Don't make things too complicated and be satisfied with little. It doesn't all have to be perfect before you start – just do it, and see where you end up. I think that this has been the mentality throughout the organization"* (FM3). A manager notes something similar: *"You see that more often here. We just start, and then we'll figure out later how we are going to manage something exactly"* (M5).

This reflects a culture in which experimentation with new initiatives is welcomed, and where learning takes place in practice rather than in advance. Risk tolerance plays a key role in this, especially given the inherent challenges of co-production with a vulnerable target group. It requires trust in the capabilities of users themselves, but also in the judgment of frontline staff. As one manager describes the NOIZ project:

This isn't exactly a target group that makes people say, "Sure, give them the keys." You can't just assume it'll all go well. But if the conditions are right and the selection is done carefully, it can absolutely work. That trust begins with the confidence that social workers and staff at the drop-in centers have in the caretakers and NOIZ participants. The further you go up in the organizational hierarchy, the fewer people know exactly what they're saying yes to – except that they trust the person who's asking. And that's a beautiful way of working, but also a bit nerve-racking. (M3)

This risk-tolerant culture also implies acceptance that things will sometimes go wrong. There have been chairpersons and treasurers on the councils who submitted fraudulent claims, incidents at NOIZ locations, and problems involving visitor-volunteers. Yet such episodes are treated as part of the learning process rather than grounds for abandoning co-production altogether. As the manager of all drop-in centers put it: *“Yes, people have been evicted. But that has never put the concept itself under pressure. You intervene, you adjust, and you move on. The margin of error will never be zero, and we accepted that from day one”* (M3).

This also translates to a culture of trust and autonomy in personnel. Many interviewed staff members say they experience this culture in their own work, particularly in the freedom location managers feel in running their drop-in centers as previously described. Thereby, co-production seems well-aligned with DRG’s organizational mission and culture. As a staff member notes: *“I think self-management really fits with the DNA of this organization because of the emphasis on autonomy. I think our culture, where staff are encouraged to try out their own ideas, and where the rules are flexible, matches very well with the principle of self-management, where you try to give people back their own autonomy”* (M6).

Overall, these accounts suggest a strong alignment between DRG’s organizational culture and its approach to co-production. This alignment creates the conditions that allow co-production to take root and persist throughout the organization.

13.5 Organizational commitment to co-production

The preceding sections have shown how both organizations provide support for co-production and how the programs are embedded in the organizational structure, mission, and culture. Together, though in different ways, we see that all factors combined shape commitment throughout the organization to co-production.

NuNN: Bottom-up commitment to co-production, facilitated by autonomy and alignment

At NuNN, organizational commitment to co-production is rooted first and foremost in the identity of the shelter itself, embodied by the frontline staff who are experienced and socialized in this way of working. This history creates commitment among frontline workers, who act as guardians of the shelter’s identity and values. These frontline workers function as both institutional memory and everyday ambassadors of the self-managed model.

The supporting organization, RIBW, facilitates this commitment by protecting the shelter's autonomy. Organizational commitment here means knowing when not to interfere – while still absorbing the financial, legal, and infrastructural risks that come with backing an initiative that operates largely outside of standard protocols. As the director of the organization notes, *“It’s crucial that everyone who works there operates from a specific culture – and that’s called self-management”* (M1).

This delicate balance is not self-sustaining. It relies on ongoing advocacy and relationship management between NuNN and RIBW leadership to protect this autonomy. As one long-serving staff member described it: *“You have to keep explaining what NuNN is and why it matters. Every few years, someone new comes in at RIBW who doesn’t know the story. Then you have to start again”* (F1). Still, the underlying values of NuNN align closely enough with those of RIBW to make the relationship workable. As one team member noted: *“I truly believe that they are proud to have something like NuNN within the organization”* (F4).

In short, at NuNN, the commitment to co-production is mainly created within the shelter itself among frontline staff. This staff further creates commitment not only among participants, but also among the organization and wider environment through active advocacy of the concept. The organization, in turn, facilitates this commitment by providing balanced autonomy and support to NuNN in order to sustain its distinctiveness.

DRG – Commitment throughout the organization, actively generated by management

At DRG, an organization-wide commitment to co-production exists as well, although it is created through different mechanisms. This commitment did not grow purely organically from the bottom-up, but instead also reflects a long-term strategic shift in both mission, organizational culture, and accompanying structures. Years ago, DRG began steering toward a vision that placed greater emphasis on client involvement. And the organization signified commitment to this by creating a client council and expanding the visitor-volunteer model.

This created a shift toward co-production, and created a culture in which an initiative such as NOIZ could be developed from the bottom-up. Thereby, the organization-wide commitment is created through a combination of organizational structures, mission, and culture. Moreover, DRG shows how one form of co-production may strengthen another. In fieldwork, for instance, there were moments when client council members encouraged staff to make more use of visitor-volunteers at certain organization events.

Furthermore, what NOIZ illustrates is how organization-wide commitment can be created through a strategic distribution of incentives within a program. Whether intentional or not, NOIZ is built on a structure that allocates responsibilities in such a way that all actors involved are motivated to embrace and sustain co-production. This cultivates a shared interest in making the concept work. The added value for both participants and caretakers is obvious: through NOIZ, they gain a stable place to sleep, free of charge, for an extended period. Drop-in center managers retain authority over selecting caretakers, which is vital because they are ultimately responsible for the location and must trust the person they entrust with the keys. This selection power enables them to support homeless individuals they already know and believe deserve the opportunity. This principle of reciprocity has motivated several drop-in center managers to wholeheartedly support the concept as it was scaled toward their drop-in centers. As one location manager put it: *“It started at one drop-in center, and they thought it went well. So, then the social work team said, ‘let’s roll it out further, because it could help a lot of people.’ And I didn’t think it would be very suitable for this place because it’s tiny. But what convinced me to go ahead with it here was the opportunity to offer the caretakers a place”* (FM5). Similarly, for social workers, NOIZ offers an additional tool to help their clients: ‘For part of our target group, this is simply an excellent solution,’ as a social worker noted. Finally, for the organizational management and board, NOIZ provides an instrument to strengthen the credibility of the organization’s vision and core values as the capital’s no-nonsense, innovative problem-solver, aiming to help and empower people in need (DRG, 2025). Combined, these factors created commitment throughout the organization to the initiative.

The manager of the drop-in centers believes this to be a crucial enabling condition for the initiative’s success: *“I think the main success factor was the willingness of staff to do this. If this had been my idea and I had told the staff, ‘This is what we’re going to do, and you need to make sure it works,’ then I don’t think it would have succeeded. This only works if it feels like, ‘oh cool, we get to do this,’ and everyone is willing to go the extra mile for it”* (M3).

In short, at DRG, shared organizational commitment to co-production has been fostered over the years by embedding it in organizational structures, aligning it with its mission and culture, and by providing incentives that motivate people to co-produce.

13.6 External institutional conditions

In addition to internal organizational arrangements, co-production depends on external institutional conditions. These include not only financial support, but also legitimacy among neighborhood residents, service partners, and policymakers. The final part of this chapter explores how the two organizations engage with these actors to create the space needed for co-production to function and endure. We distinguish four forms of external support: (1) financial structures, (2) neighborhood legitimacy, (3) partnerships with frontline actors, and (4) political and policy-level acceptance.

Public funding and financial structures

RIBW receives a standing municipal subsidy to keep NuNN running. For 2025, the City of Nijmegen allocates about € 354,000 in social support funds (*Wmo subsidies*). The city also pays the building lease directly, so the subsidy RIBW books is largely payroll of the 3.1 FTE frontline staff and overhead costs. In the wider funding package that the city negotiates with RIBW – multiple shelters, outreach care, and Housing First – NuNN represents roughly € 354k out of € 1,425 million and, inside RIBW's overall € 42million turnover, well under one percent. The account manager meets the municipal policy team every quarter; once a year, the organization files a brief report that zeros in on bed occupancy, average length of stay, and the number of residents who move on to independent housing. NuNN itself collects a modest second stream: guests and taskvolunteers pay € 5,60 per night for a bed and hot dinner. With an average occupancy close to ninety percent, the communal household fund should come to about €45,000 a year, though in practice, not every service user pays his dues. Managers rent their own rooms from RIBW at roughly € 370 a month, and the shelter receives food, clothing, and small household items in kind from local donors.

DRG's drop-in centers operate on a larger canvas than NuNN. In 2024 the organization booked just over €46 million in income: about €17,7 million in straightforward government subsidies, €26,4 million in contract revenue – primarily for temporary accommodation of Ukrainian refugees – and €1,63 million raised through private gifts and fundraising campaigns. Of the money spent in 2025, roughly €21,4 million fell under the Homelessness program cluster, which includes the drop-in centers, making this the most extensive program of the organization. The centers are financed with recurring subsidies from municipalities (the municipality of Zaanstad pays one location) that cover personnel costs and overhead. Additional services of the drop-in centers, such as the washing of clothes, daily meals, coffee, and breakfast, are drawn from charitable donations (cash or in-kind); service users do not pay for the drop-in centers' services. The three co-production programs that operate inside

the homelessness cluster have no earmarked budget line of their own; their staff hours and minor expenses are absorbed in the greater drop-in center budget.

In short, both organizations are funded mainly by municipalities in the context of homelessness services. However, this funding is not directly tied to the co-productive methods they employ.

The importance of external support for the co-production programs

External support plays a vital role not just in maintaining organizational continuity, but in sustaining the co-productive character of services. For NuNN, such support is particularly critical. While the shelter fulfills a public function funded by the municipality, its self-managed model may result in group decisions that do not align with the preferences of staff, partner organizations, or local officials. This can strain relations with the shelter's external environment. As one municipal policy advisor remarked: *"The city pours a lot of subsidy into this facility, yet the residents decide how it runs. That can be tricky for municipalities"* (R1). Internally, such autonomy is central to self-management; externally, it can appear risky. Because NuNN is effectively synonymous with its self-managed structure, losing political or neighborhood support would threaten not only the co-production but the shelter itself. Maintaining this model thus depends on more than municipal funding; it requires sustained goodwill from other frontline and policy actors.

The stakes are different for DRG. Here, external support is essential to secure the long-term funding of the drop-in centers as a whole, but the co-production elements embedded within them are less exposed. Only NOIZ – because it is relatively new and requires district permits for overnight stays – depends on external support. Still, if NOIZ were discontinued, the rest of the drop-in centers would continue operating. DRG's other co-production initiatives, the visitor-volunteer program and client councils, are viewed as integral to the broader drop-in center service rather than stand-alone programs needing outside endorsement.

In short, NuNN must continuously defend both its outcomes and its self-managed method. In contrast, DRG's co-production programs benefit from external goodwill without being immediately critical to the organization's survival. This distinction shapes their differing strategies for building and maintaining support.

Neighborhood support

One way in which both NuNN and DRG's drop-in centers build support is by maintaining constructive relationships with the surrounding neighborhood.

Maintaining positive rapport with the neighborhood is regarded as essential by both NuNN and DR. Given the nature of these facilities, tensions with neighbors are not uncommon. As DRG noted in its 2016 annual report: *“When alcoholics, drug users, and people experiencing homelessness can access the facilities of a drop-in center, it relieves pressure on the neighborhood. However, immediate neighbors may also experience greater nuisance from people causing disturbances on the street”* (De Regenboog Groep 2017, 37). NuNN, too, experienced dismay among some neighbors (also see Chapter 5), as a social worker recalls: *“We had to build a good reputation from the ground up. That’s why this street is so important to us and why it is central in our house rules”* (F1). Both organizations see this as a vital condition for sustaining their work.

A key strategy to maintaining positive neighborhood relations is the prevention of nuisance. This is one of the reasons why NuNN has adopted a strict rule: no disturbances in the surrounding area. Theft, noise, and incidents on the street are strictly forbidden, and frontline workers may act assertively to enforce this rule. As one former staff member put it: *“One of the worst things you can do at NuNN is cause trouble in the street. The street is sacred. The future of NuNN depends on whether or not we maintain peace there. That’s just not something you mess with”* (F9). This principle is regularly emphasized during resident meetings. In the case of DRG’s NOIZ, maintaining good relations with neighbors may involve practical adjustments – for example, responding to neighbors’ complaints about outdoor lighting. Across all locations, staff take neighborhood concerns seriously.

Beyond minimizing disturbance, both organizations also seek to build positive, personal connections with neighbors. A NuNN resident described how they had recently given a tour of the shelter to a group of students living down the street. Social workers actively encourage such outreach, although they acknowledge that much depends on the openness of a particular resident group. *“It’s important to keep making that connection to the outside world – to invite it in,”* a social worker remarks. *“Otherwise, you risk getting stuck in a cocoon as a volunteer group. We don’t want to become a parallel world. People from outside need to keep coming in”* (F5).

DRG pursues a similar strategy. A location manager explained that they maintain regular contact with the residents in the street. They also organize appreciation days for donors, inviting them to visit the drop-in centers. *“People often assume it’s some kind of Sodom and Gomorrah in there, with everyone lying around with needles in their arms. But when they walk in, they find a cozy coffeehouse. That’s how we try to keep the neighborhood engaged”* (FM1). The cleaning crews that visitor-volunteers run at multiple drop-in

centers also keep the surrounding streets tidy. This is another way to foster goodwill and signal care for the local environment.

Constructive partnerships with frontline partners

Beyond neighborhood relations, both organizations engage in building constructive partnerships with frontline actors. However, NuNN is the organization that mainly focuses on co-production. At DRG, the need to explain or justify co-production is generally limited to the NOIZ, since the other programs are seen as part of the overall drop-in infrastructure and operate without specific external scrutiny. As such, outreach efforts mostly take the form of simple gestures, such as notifying the neighbors and the community police officer when a NOIZ facility opens at a new location.

Still, DRG actively promotes NOIZ when opportunities arise, with the aim of inspiring other organizations or unlocking new resources, such as shared space. As one manager put it: *“It basically runs itself, but whenever I go somewhere, I tell the story in the hope that others might think, hey, that’s interesting, how do you do that?”* (M3). In this sense, DRG’s external engagement aims less to defend the program and more to grow the model – either by launching similar initiatives internally or by forming partnerships with other service providers.

By contrast, the NuNN’s model of self-managed night shelter differs more starkly from traditional shelter operations, which means that organizational legitimacy must be maintained more actively. Over time, the team has managed to build trust with key stakeholders such as municipal policymakers, police officers, and local care providers. This depends on the continuous articulation of how self-management works and what it contributes. One frontline worker noted: *“You can tell that the police and GGD are actually proud of how we operate”* (F2). Still, this legitimacy does not automatically extend to all parts of the service environment. As a staff member of a partner agency noted: *“There’s still some skepticism out there. I’ve had colleagues say, ‘Here comes another one from NuNN – they got kicked out again’”* (R2). Staff do acknowledge this tension: *“It’s hard to work in a self-managed setting and try to do what’s best for the group, for the partners, and for yourself all at once”* (F5).

For the self-management model to function, however, mutual understanding between different shelters is crucial in order to create a balanced group of service users. One social worker expressed frustration about the lack of alignment with other shelters: *“They never ask whether someone might be suitable for NuNN. But they do send us*

the most aggressive, the most difficult cases. People that, from the first second, we could have told them – based on their issues – this is not a good place” (F5)

Still, the value of the model is evident to many. Since its inception, NuNN has generated minimal neighborhood disturbance. As one police officer reported: “I’ve been asked by [social worker] to check nuisance reports annually. You can count them on one hand” (R3). In some cases, these working relationships evolve into true alliances. One social worker described the police as “our biggest advocates now. They’re the ones telling people, this actually works” (F1). Another emphasized that this trust was earned: “It took years of contact, keeping our doors open to police officers, and reaching out proactively when problems arose” (F5).

Building policy-level acceptance of co-production

Both NuNN and DRG also cultivate relationships with civil servants and politicians to generate support for the organization and for co-production. At NuNN, this is especially important because, from NuNN’s social workers’ perspectives, municipal policies sometimes hamper its self-managed model. For example, to keep participation beneficial for its residents, the social workers advocate against municipal aspirations to straighten out NuNN’s lower residents’ fees than in other facilities. Moreover, recent policies to impose progress checks would, according to staff, shift decision-making power away from the resident collective and undercut the logic of self-management.

To prevent such policy pressures from undermining their approach, the NuNN team makes ongoing efforts to promote and explain their model to local administrators. “There are people at the municipality who really like what we do,” one worker said, “but we have to keep pushing, keep promoting it. We try to always show up when we’re invited” (F1). They also create their own stages: city council members, municipal policy advisors, and aldermen are routinely asked to visit the shelter or organize events on National Homelessness Day. When draft rules appear harmful, staff speak up early and offer concrete alternatives. As one worker explained, “We keep an open mind for what helps, but we push back on ideas dreamt up at city hall by people far removed from life here” (F1). These tactics have paid off. On several occasions, NuNN has negotiated to alter policy initiatives in order to facilitate its self-managed approach. Similarly, DRG actively advocates its NOIZ program at the municipal level in order to gain help in navigating potential regulatory demands for the program.

In short, political relationships are managed not for resource support alone, but also to influence policy in order to keep co-production viable.

Advocacy and legitimacy in the policy field

Beyond their immediate environments, both organizations also engage in efforts to shape the broader national policy landscape. Their advocacy is not limited to their own programs; rather, they actively promote co-production as a legitimate and desirable approach within homelessness services more generally. For example, DRG – through its NOIZ initiative – is involved in the *National Platform on Self-Management* (*Landelijk Platform Zelfbeheer*), which is mainly organized by a social worker from NuNN. This platform brings together various organizations working with vulnerable populations to exchange knowledge, offer mutual support, and create development opportunities for participants involved in self-managed programs. Through such collaboration, both DRG and NuNN seek to strengthen the recognition, credibility, and perceived value of co-production at the national level.

In short, external support is relevant to both NuNN and the drop-in centers in which the DRG's three co-production programs operate. However, it is more critical to NuNN, because the actions and decisions of co-producing residents directly affect the responsibilities and mandates of external organizations. As a result, NuNN must not only build support in its immediate surroundings but also actively cultivate trust and understanding among operational partners and local policymakers to protect the very possibility of self-management, whereas DRG's co-production programs can continue to operate even if specific external actors remain unconvinced.

Conclusion

All in all, this chapter argued that successful co-production is not only shaped by participant groups and frontline professionals, but also crucially depends on the organizational conditions that are created within the organization. Both RIBW and DRG provide practical support: budgets, training, incentives, and discretionary autonomy for staff. In both contexts, stable teams and relational continuity further strengthen co-production.

How the co-production efforts are structured within organizations, however, is markedly different. Table 13.1 below shows how both approaches, in different ways, enable co-production by providing support and generating commitment throughout the organization. NuNN operates as a semi-autonomous entity within RIBW, with co-production embedded in its identity as a self-managed shelter. Commitment is primarily generated from within, by long-standing and committed staff, while RIBW supports this by maintaining distance and absorbing risk. DRG, by contrast, takes

an integrated approach in facilitating co-production, mainstreaming it throughout its organizational structures and culture. Through structural coordination, cultural alignment, and targeted incentives, actors throughout the organization are supportive of co-production.

Table 13.1 Institutional conditions of co-production

	NuNN / RIBW	DRG
Resourcing co-production	Modest direct support; generic background support	Provides funds for incentives and training; background support
Shaping frontline conditions	High autonomy; team- and user-led hiring; continuity via internal mobility.	Operational autonomy within formal structure; embedding co-production in candidate profiles, client council involvement in hiring
Program-organization structure	Decoupled autonomy	Integrated coordination
Alignment with mission and culture	Self-management as core identity; trust-based culture; broadly aligned with RIBW's mission.	Co-production is embedded in a pragmatic, risk-tolerant, client-centered, and autonomy-oriented culture.
Commitment within the organization is created through	Bottom-up; actively created by frontline staff, embedded in culture, protected by autonomy from RIBW.	Combined top-down and bottom-up; commitment built through incentives, and alignment with mission and culture.
External funding	Municipality funds NuNN; other service providers facilitate it	Municipality funds drop-in centers, combined with donations from corporations, churches, and private citizens.
External support and legitimacy	Active efforts by social workers to create legitimacy and autonomy for self-management	Active efforts to maintain good relations with stakeholders

The chapter shows that sustaining co-production requires different types of external support, depending on the type of co-production. At DRG, the co-production programs are woven into the general structure of the drop-in centers, with limited external consequences of the co-productions. At NuNN, where co-producers are in charge of core operational decisions, support must be actively built and maintained both internally and externally. Their authority touches on the mandates of external actors, which raises the stakes and demands continuous efforts to generate external support. These two approaches – protected autonomy at NuNN and integrated coordination at DRG – both enable co-production, but do so in different ways.

Section conclusion: Conditions for successful co-production

This final empirical section demonstrated that ensuring the practical implementation of co-production aligns with its stated intentions requires a dynamic interplay of conditions. Elements related to the participant group, program structure, professional support, and organizational conditions (both within and beyond the organization) play an essential role in how co-production unfolds.

Figure 13.1 summarizes these conditions. Depicted at the bottom of the figure, successful co-production requires a group capable of generating the collective capacity to execute tasks in alignment with program intentions. This demands trust, both within the group and toward frontline workers, as well as commitment: an active dedication to the practice of co-production and identification with its underlying goals and values.

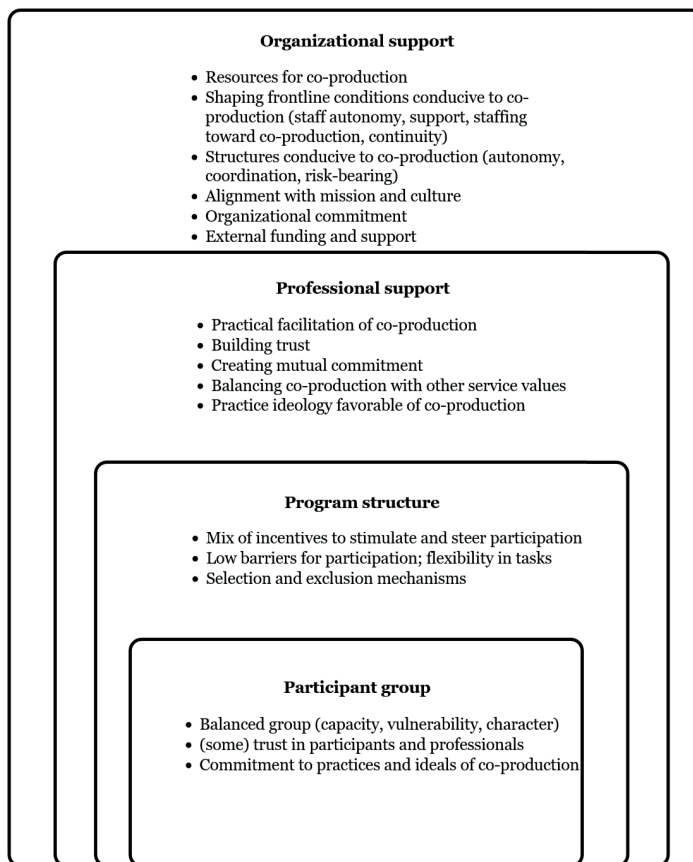


Figure 13.1 Conditions for co-production success

Program structures facilitate the creation of such groups. Programs require a mix of incentives – starting with salient external rewards (such as shelter or financial compensation) but ultimately offering opportunities for social connection and personal development to sustain participation. To remain inclusive, tasks often have low entry barriers and offer flexibility to adapt to participants' capacities and provide chances for growth. Furthermore, programs contain essential selection and exclusion mechanisms to maintain balance and safety within the group.

Professional support remains indispensable, even in self-management settings. Professionals not only facilitate the practical side of co-production but are essential for building trust and fostering commitment within the group. In doing so, they must continuously balance the stimulation of autonomy with the safeguarding of other values, such as safety, inclusion, and fairness. This requires professionals who act from a clear, shared vision regarding the value of co-production.

Finally, the organization and its environment create the necessary boundary conditions. It facilitates co-production by providing resources and shaping frontline conditions conducive to co-production, such as staff autonomy, team stability, and an organizational culture that embraces the concept. Moreover, external legitimacy is crucial: co-production can only be sustained through sufficient support from the neighborhood, operational partners, and the broader policy field. This external support is actively fostered by program representatives, such as participants, frontline workers, and organizational managers, who act as ambassadors for the model. By continuously explaining the value of their approach and showing that it works in practice, they build the trust and goodwill necessary to protect the program's autonomy and secure its continuity.



Chapter 14.

Conclusion and discussion

Citizens are increasingly viewed as active partners rather than passive recipients of public services. The ideal of co-production promises better public services by making these more efficient, effective, and democratic (e.g., Sharp 1980; Parks et al. 1981; Needham 2008; Brix et al. 2020; Acar et al. 2025). This ambition is also widespread in services targeted at vulnerable groups. For instance, in Dutch homelessness services, there are prevalent aspirations to include service users' perspectives in policy and services (see e.g., Wolf and Jonker 2020; Rijksoverheid 2022). Similar aspirations concern, for instance, municipal debt assistance (Jungmann and Wesdorp 2017), and youth protection (e.g., Richtlijnen Jeugdhulp). Likewise, there are initiatives around the world that seek to include groups of vulnerable citizens in co-producing services – from prisons (Darke 2014; Nyvoll 2025, 21) to care providers (Trappenburg 2008). The underlying ideas seem comparable: by giving vulnerable citizens voice and responsibilities in the services they use, services are expected to better meet their needs and preferences, as well as potentially stimulating participants' personal growth and recovery or rehabilitation.

At the same time, the co-production literature provides little evidence about how realistic such aspirations are. Inherent power asymmetries, limited resources, mutual distrust, and the complexity of the challenges vulnerable citizens face could complicate or even hinder co-production (Park 2020; Broadhurst 2024). It is therefore far from self-evident that co-production in these settings will lead to better or more equitable collaboration. This dissertation set out to investigate that tension. The central question was: *Under what conditions can co-production with vulnerable citizens succeed?*

This dissertation demonstrates that co-production with vulnerable citizens can be successful. The cases presented here involve individuals who are among the most socially excluded – people experiencing homelessness – yet they take on a degree of responsibility and influence that exceeds what is commonly reported in the co-production literature (Haug 2024). However, this success is dynamic and contingent upon multiple processes and enabling conditions. The process hinges on navigating the dual potential of group dynamics, which both drives co-production and presents a risk of disruption. This creates the critical task for frontline workers: they must balance stepping back to foster autonomy with actively guarding the process against disruptive forces. Ultimately, success depends on the alignment between a program's ambitions and a specific constellation of enabling conditions across multiple levels.

To arrive at this conclusion, this dissertation addressed the following four sub-questions:

1. What do we know about co-production with vulnerable citizens, and under which theoretical conditions can we expect it to succeed?
2. How are the co-production programs designed, and how does everyday practice compare to these intentions?
3. Which processes shape the everyday practice of co-production?
4. Which conditions influence how these processes unfold?

In this final chapter, I will first summarize the answers to these questions, synthesizing the empirical findings into a conceptual model for successful co-production. Subsequently, I will discuss the theoretical contributions of this study, the methodological implications, and avenues for further research. Finally, I formulate implications for policy and practice.

14.1 Answering the research questions: From intentions to conditions

14.1.1 Theory – Co-production with vulnerable citizens

Chapters 2 and 3 established the theoretical foundation for this dissertation by clarifying the core concepts and the central puzzle underlying the study. The guiding question was: *What do we know about co-production with vulnerable citizens, and under which theoretical conditions can we expect it to succeed?*

Chapter 2 first discussed the origins of co-production as a concept that recognizes the inherent importance of citizen inputs for public goods and, especially, public services (Ostrom and Ostrom 1978; Parks et al. 1980). Building on this mutual dependence, scholars argued that acknowledging citizens' essential role could make services more effective and efficient, but also more democratic – and that it could support new ways of imagining citizen–state relationships (Whitaker 1980; Sharp 1980; Ostrom 1996). From the early 21st century onward, the concept gained increasing traction among scholars and policymakers alike, but its widespread use also contributed to conceptual stretching and blurred boundaries.

To clarify how the concept is used in this dissertation, I conceptualized co-production as a relationship between a service provider and a service user – or group of service users – in which users contribute directly and actively to the planning, design, and/or delivery of public services (adapted from Brandsen and Honingh 2016, 431).

I highlighted how co-production's ambition reshapes citizens' roles into more active ones, aiming to give them greater ownership and control over the services they use. At the same time, this ambition often rests on an idealized image of the active, capable citizen, implicitly assuming that people are willing and able to take on such a role. This raises questions about the applicability of co-production to those who do not easily fit this mold, including vulnerable citizens.

Chapter 3 therefore discussed vulnerability as a contentious yet useful analytic concept for studying relations between citizens and the state. Following Patrick Brown (2022), I emphasized that vulnerability should not be treated as a fixed property of specific individuals or groups. Rather, it is situational, relational, and contingent – arising when people face demands they cannot easily meet within a particular context (P. Brown 2021, 12). As a policy term, vulnerability also has an ambivalent potential: it can legitimate support, yet it may also justify paternalistic intervention and stigmatization (K. Brown 2011). In practice, interventions toward vulnerable groups often combine elements of support and control (K. Brown 2024).

To specify how vulnerability is understood in this dissertation, I defined it in a narrower, service-relational sense: a relational position of dependency on public service providers for basic needs or livelihood, typically grounded in a combination of mental or physical health problems and/or material deficits such as financial hardship or housing instability (based on Numans et al. 2021). Used in this way, vulnerability is not a label that reduces individuals to their problems. Instead, it functions as an analytic lens for examining co-production in contexts where service relations are shaped by dependency and power asymmetries. Building on Numans et al. (2021; 2023) and Numans (2024), I further argued that vulnerability becomes manifest in relational and societal experiences – especially in encounters with welfare services themselves – such as powerlessness, inferiority, distrust, patronization, and stigmatization (Numans et al. 2021, Numans 2024).

I then discussed the ambivalent nature of co-production with vulnerable groups (also see Müller 2018, cited in Stougaard 2021, 22-23; Røhnebæk and Bjerck 2021, 742). On the one hand, co-production holds emancipatory potential: it may counter vulnerability by improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of services and by fostering user empowerment (e.g., Broadhurst 2024, 14). From an optimistic perspective, co-production may be particularly well-suited to such contexts. On the other hand, the circumstances that constitute vulnerability – such as limited resources, dependency, and mutual distrust – may also create obstacles to co-production that are not easily overcome (Vanleene 2019; Park 2020; Broadhurst 2024). While empirical research on

this topic remains scarce, an expanding literature illustrates this ambivalence. Some case studies highlight co-production's potential, showing how it can make services more responsive to users' needs and aspirations. Yet in other instances, the practical realities of co-production reflect only a fraction of its underlying aspirations.

Drawing on the street-level bureaucracy literature, I argued that this variation may be explained by the structural and institutional conditions under which service providers operate (Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). Resource constraints, uncertainty, and the need to pursue multiple – sometimes contradictory – goals and values may all impede the implementation of co-production in line with its ambitions. These constraints may be especially salient in services aimed at vulnerable groups. Traditional perspectives on street-level bureaucracy would therefore expect limited room for co-production – at least in forms that match its aspirations of a more equal, empowering, and inclusive service relationship. At the same time, I noted that developments since the early street-level bureaucracy literature may make co-production more feasible today. Policymakers, managers, frontline workers, and citizens increasingly aspire to shape service provision through co-production, potentially altering conditions at the street level in ways that are more conducive to such practices. I therefore concluded that, if we want to specify the theoretical conditions that enable co-production with vulnerable citizens, we must take co-production's ambitions seriously while remaining attentive to the constraints and dilemmas identified by street-level bureaucracy research. Rather than viewing co-production and street-level bureaucracy as opposing perspectives, they should be treated as complementary: co-production's ambitions can only reasonably be expected to materialize when the everyday constraints of street-level work are explicitly acknowledged and addressed.

In Chapter 4, I presented an analytical framework to guide the empirical analysis and identify the conditions shaping the successful implementation of co-production programs. To systematically examine these programs, I operationalized co-production along the dimensions of who (actors and roles), what (activities and decision-making authority), and why (rationale and incentives) (Nabatchi et al. 2017). This operationalization enabled comparison across programs and supported a systematic contrast between program design and program functioning in practice. It thereby allowed me to assess success in co-production initiatives, using the alignment between a program's design and its implementation as an analytical proxy. While this operationalization has downsides – for example, more ambitious designs may be harder to realize in practice – it provides a useful lens for identifying where and how co-production drifts from its aspirations.

To explain this success (or lack thereof) at a theoretical level, I identified a set of enabling conditions operating across multiple interconnected levels. Starting from the bottom up, I argued that successful co-production depends on the participant group (e.g., trust, commitment, capacity), the program structure (e.g., incentives), professional support (e.g., skills, discretion, attitudes), and organizational conditions in interaction with the environment (e.g., organizational culture, managerial support, external legitimacy). This framework – developed abductively through iterative interaction between theory and empirical insights – served as the foundation for the empirical analysis presented in the subsequent chapters.

14.1.2. Research approach and context

To answer the main research question empirically, I situated the study within the field of homeless services for two reasons: the vulnerability of the target group and the widespread ambitions for co-production in this domain. I conducted fieldwork at two organizations known for actively involving service users in co-production: NuNN (a self-managed night shelter) and DRG (a larger service provider that provides especially daytime shelter for the homeless). NuNN represents a radical form of user-driven co-production (Park 2020) where service users run the shelter and take its operational decisions. DRG, by contrast, is a more conventional service provider that steadily increased their emphasis on co-production over the years.

Methodologically, I adopted a comparative ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Simmons and Smith 2019). I conducted extended fieldwork that combined participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis across both sites. I aimed to paint a comprehensive picture of the co-production programs. Therefore, I spoke to a wide range of respondents, including participants, frontline workers, frontline managers, organizational managers, and policymakers. A strong emphasis on observations, enabled me to study co-production by observing concrete interactions, behaviors, and social dynamics as they unfolded, rather than relying solely on respondents' retrospective accounts. The long-term engagement was also essential for building trust and rapport with a population that is often considered hard to reach, and whose perspectives may remain inaccessible without sustained presence. By employing a contrastive explanatory strategy (Lichtermann and Reed 2014), I was able to identify the specific conditions that enable co-production in practice.

14.1.3 Intentions and practice

To understand the distinct nature of these programs, I first reconstructed their historical origins. NuNN emerged in 1996 from a squatting action by homeless people

and sympathizers of their ambitions to self-manage a shelter, which were born out of dissatisfaction with the strict rules and limited access of traditional shelters. Consequently, self-management here is not merely a method, but the organization's core identity. DRG, rooted in a 1970s initiative to help those who fell through the cracks of the system, evolved into a service provider aimed at vulnerable groups that deliberately engaged users in co-production to foster inclusion, equality, and shared responsibility.

After outlining the historical context of both cases, I asked: *How are the co-production programs in the studied cases designed, and how does everyday practice compare to these intentions?* Drawing on organizational documents, I identified four distinct ways/programs in which the organizations involve their service users in co-production: self-management at NuNN, and at DRG the visitor-volunteer model, the client council, and self-management at NOIZ. The main differences of the programs relate to their target group, the influence and autonomy provided to participants (peer discretion and (peer) governance), and the envisioned extent (continuous/limited) and nature (directive/consultative) of professional support, and their rationales.

The analysis shows that the implementation of these programs largely aligns with their original intentions. Across all four programs, the core envisioned activities are carried out. Residents at NuNN run the shelter through weekly shifts and make collective decisions; visitor-volunteers at DRG perform essential operational tasks; client council members advise and co-decide on policies in the drop-in centers, and at NOIZ caretakers manage the shelter at night in the absence of staff. In other words, all programs do succeed in engaging vulnerable citizens in co-production. Moreover, the programs have demonstrated sustainability, as each program has been functional for over five years.

While implementation largely reflects the original intentions, there are some differences between intentions and practice. Not all intended target groups are reached to the same degree at all times: client councils struggled to include 'rough sleepers' and non-Dutch speaking people, while NOIZ occasionally accommodated people with more complex problems than envisioned. Tasks are generally carried out as intended, though levels of engagement vary: some participants take on more responsibility than expected; others withdraw. Decision-making power mostly aligns with formal design, though actual influence may fluctuate. In general, organizational members continue to pursue the programs' original rationales, and the programs seem to achieve their desired outcomes enough to keep them going. However, sometimes, the practices of co-production drifted away from their intentions.

For example, self-management ideals at NuNN were sometimes compromised by opportunistic behavior or rule violations, and not all participants in the NOIZ program achieved the intended successful exit. These exceptions highlight that while the co-production models are robust, their implementation may fluctuate within programs, depending on specific circumstances.

14.1.4 The process of co-production

This shifted our attention to the processes of co-production. Chapters 8 and 9 showed that these are shaped by the internal group dynamics among service users and the support of frontline workers.

Group dynamics

Within the co-production programs, service users live, work, and/or decide together. This proximity inevitably generates group dynamics – sometimes warm and welcoming, at other times chaotic, conflictual, and exhausting. These dynamics are shaped by the composition of the group itself: smaller groups are easier to self-regulate than large ones; groups with stable cores, for better or worse, pass on norms and routines to newcomers; and the vulnerabilities people carry – addiction, mental illness, chronic stress – shape how they behave and interact. Together, these features seem to affect how well participant groups can fulfill their responsibilities, how subgroups and cliques form, and how likely incidents are. Across settings, we saw the similar dynamics: people who greet newcomers, share food and cigarettes, form friendships or quietly correct each other's behavior – but also chaotic meetings, grumbling about mess left behind or a loudly snoring roommate, and sudden turmoil when someone in crisis spirals out of control.

These everyday interactions function as informal mechanisms by which groups self-regulate. At the individual level, we saw spontaneous support and incidental conflict (for example over mess, noise, or a lack of privacy). At the collective level, such interactions crystallized into peer socialization in group cultures. These cultures can foster mutual care and everyday accountability but can also produce clique formation and peer pressure that actively undermines responsibility. While these informal forms of group interaction clearly shape how co-production plays out, they are not unique to it: similar dynamics are likely in any comparable group-based service setting, from regular shelters to classrooms.

What makes the programs studied here distinctive is that participant groups are formally empowered to regulate themselves. This takes two main forms: *peer discretion* and *peer governance*. Peer discretion gives individual participants the power to make

on-the-spot decisions about other service users. In programs with continuous professional support, this discretion is quite limited and mainly a by-product of specific tasks and roles. In the client council and visitor-volunteer programs, for instance, participants have limited discretion over practical questions such as who can shower for how long or who qualifies for compensation after not fully attending a meeting. However, in the two self-managed programs (NuNN and NOIZ), with limited professional support, peer discretion is a necessary mechanism for maintaining legitimate order and safety in the absence of frontline workers. Participants there decide whether to issue formal warnings, deny late-night entry, or recommend that someone be suspended. Such decisions are sometimes taken in situations where no frontline workers are present, and thus place responsibility for interpreting rules and balancing safety and leniency squarely in the hands of participants themselves. At one o'clock in the morning, it is a caretaker or volunteer – not a social worker – who weighs rules, safety, and compassion at the door.

Peer governance entails *collective* decision-making about others. In the client council and NuNN, participants distribute roles, rewards and sometimes impose sanctions. Especially at NuNN, stakes are high: people make collective decisions about rule application, the distribution of benefits and sanctions – they may even issue shelter bans. In one residents' meeting, for example, a participant apologized for physically assaulting someone and smashing a phone but also argued that the other person had invaded his “aura,” and that his reaction was, to him, understandable. After deliberation, the group opted for a warning rather than suspension, weighing the seriousness of the incident against the severe consequences of eviction. Thereby, participants collectively and openly negotiate service values such as order, safety, accountability, wellbeing, and fairness.

These formal mechanisms for self-regulation are deeply intertwined with informal group cultures. They provide arenas in which participants can deliberate, voice conflicts, adapt house rules, and correct one another – for instance by articulating what they expect from a good chairperson. In this way, peer discretion and peer governance not only enable groups to regulate themselves, but also serve as sites where norms and rules are reinforced, contested, and aligned with the wishes and needs of the group.

At the same time, these mechanisms come with burdens that sometimes resemble those of frontline workers: they must set boundaries, confront aggressive or care-needing service users, and make decisions that affect others' lives. For those subjected to peer decisions, the experience is equally double-edged. When group

cultures are inclusive and open, decisions by peers can feel more context-sensitive and humane than those taken by distant professionals. When cultures are marked by peer pressure or strong cliques, the very same mechanisms can be used to protect insiders and punish outsiders. While a recurring mantra at NuNN is that ‘the group decides’, not all participants have equal influence on these decisions. Group dynamics thus have a dual potential for co-production: they are a vital engine that allows shared responsibility to work at all, yet they can also derail a program away from its original intentions when group cultures take a different turn.

Professional support

While group dynamics provide the driving force of co-production, frontline workers act as the stabilizing backbone. Professional support remains indispensable, but co-production fundamentally transforms its nature. In Chapter 9, I highlighted how frontline workers influence the process of co-production by structuring its contours, normatively guiding what participation in the programs should entail, and intervening where deemed necessary to uphold other important service values. Structuring relates to shaping the program structure and selecting its participants. Guiding involves conveying espoused norms and values in the programs and voicing what co-production, according to frontline workers, ought to entail. This showed how frontline workers support participant groups to engage in co-production and to self-regulate, focusing on structuring and guidance but limited intervention. However, there remains the underlying potential – and sometimes pressing need – for professional staff to intervene where deemed appropriate, although restraint can be even more needed. For instance, we saw that location manager at DRG saw herself forced to evict two caretakers after failing to take their roles seriously, drinking heavily and loudly disrupting the night for people sleeping in the drop-in center.

In the remainder of Chapter 9, I showed that the frontline work in these co-productions is permeated by new challenges. Co-production requires frontline workers to navigate the consequences of sharing power with participant groups whose interests, norms, and values may diverge from their own. These differences are precisely what make co-production meaningful, but they also introduce challenges. Participants may act on immediate needs or personal loyalties, while professional staff remain accountable for the program’s long-term functioning and its reputation within the program environment. Frontline workers must therefore balance supporting user autonomy while also safeguarding organizational values and long-term goals, requiring careful balancing of restraint and involvement. This tension becomes palpable when at NuNN, a participant group voted to promote a volunteer to a manager apartment rather than trying to correct his behavior simply

to remove him from the shelter – a pragmatic group decision that forces frontline workers to support a candidacy they suspect is doomed to fail and might place the initiative's credibility at risk.

All the while, this may take place, as at NuNN and DRG's NOIZ, in a situation of information asymmetry and limited professional control. At NOIZ, this manifests as a 'nerve-racking' trust: the professionals remain ultimately responsible for the shelter's safety, yet they must hand over the keys to caretakers and go home for the night, accepting that they cannot know – let alone control – what happens until they return the next morning. This situation creates inherent uncertainty to frontline workers and creates moral questions for frontline workers that have no easy answers: what to do when user decisions go against one's professional judgment or when organizational credibility is at risk? Which situations or people can be accepted to be left on their own, and when are risks too high? Sharing power inevitably means giving up some control, but not responsibility. In such moments, professionals may feel caught between standing by user-led decisions and defending practices they cannot fully support, leading to observed occasional experiences of alienation and impossible situations.

14.1.5 Enabling conditions

While co-production emerged as a sometimes fragile process, the central insight was that it often works remarkably well, albeit under specific circumstances. This observation led to the final sub-question: *Under what conditions do these processes unfold successfully?* The final empirical chapters argued that such success depends on a combination of enabling conditions operating across multiple levels: the participant group, the program structure, the frontline, and the broader organizational and institutional environment.

The composition and dynamics of the participant group play a central role. For co-production to work, groups need a workable balance of participants' capacities, character, and vulnerability. That balance helps keep group dynamics manageable while still allowing inclusion of the intended target population. Across programs, successful co-production hinges on a certain level of trust among participants – both among themselves and in frontline workers. While trust is often low at the outset and distrust cannot entirely be eliminated, trust can grow over time. Importantly, co-production requires participants' commitment to a program's practices, goals, and underlying values. In contrast, when participant groups do not subscribe to the values underlying a program, the practice of co-production may drift away from its ideals, involve free-riding, or lead to actions and decisions that outright conflict with a program's intended service values.

Program structures matter to create such groups. Program structures need three elements to make co-production succeed: (1) a balanced mix of material and non-material incentives to encourage both participation and lasting engagement; (2) accessible and flexible entry routes that match participants' diverse abilities while offering opportunities for personal development; and (3) mechanisms of inclusion *and exclusion* to maintain safety, order, and commitment to shared rules – especially in self-managed settings with limited oversight by frontline workers.

Professional support remains essential in all programs. Frontline workers provide practical facilitation, build trust amid distrust, and foster mutual commitment to the values and practices of co-production. This involves balancing guidance and restraint: stepping back to let participants take ownership, while also stepping in to safeguard core values or maintain group functioning. To do this effectively, frontline staff need autonomy, skills, and a shared belief in the value of co-production for users, along with a clear understanding of their role in it. Such a shared practice ideology among frontline workers is essential for co-production to succeed. Commitment to co-production should not be naive, but grounded in experience, patience, and a willingness to work through setbacks; trusting, not necessarily each service user or group, but the potential of co-production itself.

Fourth, organizational conditions shape whether frontline staff can fulfill this role and if participant groups are enabled in co-production. Internally, organizations support co-production through practical means – such as training, incentives, and staff autonomy – but also by embedding co-production into their structures, cultures, and staffing practices. This support can take different forms: either through protected autonomy (NuNN) or through integrated coordination (DRG). What matters most is that co-production aligns with the organization's mission and values and is actively supported across all levels. Externally, success depends on sustained legitimacy, flexible requirements, and constructive relationships with neighbors, partners, and policymakers. Especially in models where users hold significant decision-making power, like NuNN, external trust and goodwill are critical and must be continuously built by program advocates. Together, these internal and external conditions shape an environment in which co-production can take root and endure.

14.1.6 Answering the main question

Putting the pieces together, we can now answer the main question this dissertation set out to answer: *Under which conditions can co-production with vulnerable citizens succeed?* This research shows that highly vulnerable citizens, like people experiencing homelessness, can be successfully and sustainably engaged in co-production. But

success is dynamic and never guaranteed. Daily co-production processes, shaped by group dynamics and frontline work, may align with a program's aspirations, drift from them, or land somewhere in between. At the heart of the process lies the inherent interaction between the social dynamics within the group, which can both strengthen and derail co-production, and the actively structuring and guiding role of frontline workers, who constantly balance between holding back and stepping in to intervene. These processes are, in turn, shaped by conditions on multiple levels. Success does not depend on one single condition, but on the alignment between a program's intentions and a constellation of facilitating conditions, relating to the participant group, program structure, professional support, and the (extra) organizational context in which it takes place.

14.2 Theoretical implications

Having answered this research question, it is now time to distill theoretical contributions. This dissertation advances four interrelated theoretical contributions: it (i) demonstrates the potential of co-production with vulnerable citizens, (ii) identifies the central role of group dynamics, (iii) reflects on how co-production transforms frontline work, and (iv) specifies the enabling conditions that enable co-production across levels.

14.2.1 Potential for co-production with vulnerable citizens

First and foremost, the co-production initiatives analyzed in this dissertation demonstrate that meaningful and sustained co-production with vulnerable citizens is possible. This finding contrasts with a body of literature that often emphasizes the additional barriers and failures of involving highly vulnerable citizens in co-production and participation (e.g., Broadhurst 2024).

Thereby, in this dissertation I build on the findings of previous dissertations that researched the involvement of vulnerable groups in co-production (e.g., Vanleene 2019; Mortensen 2020; Stougaard 2021). However, to my knowledge, few – if any – co-production studies have combined the extreme vulnerability of the target groups with the extraordinary level of responsibility and influence created for participants – particularly in the self-managed programs at NuNN and DRG. Analytically, these initiatives can therefore be viewed as critical cases: if it is possible to successfully involve service users with these complex problems and under these challenging circumstances, then it is likely to be possible in many other contexts as well (Flyvbjerg

2006). This lends empirical weight to Brandsen's (2020, 537) proposition that co-production can work *"for more people than we would expect"* (also see Vanleene 2020, 166).

This finding is particularly significant given the broader question in the field whether co-production succeeds in transferring genuine decision-making power to participants at all. As Haug's (2023, 1083) review concluded, clear examples of users exercising control in co-production remain largely absent from the literature. This makes it even more striking that in this dissertation, we encounter co-production efforts where vulnerable citizens hold substantial responsibility and influence. While vulnerable citizens are commonly portrayed as challenging for organizations to involve in co-production (e.g., Broadhurst 2024; Palumbo and Manesh 2023, 1369), it is precisely among society's most marginalized groups that such initiatives have taken root. Comparable examples are emerging as well. Huber (2020), for instance, studied a self-managed homeless shelter that has since ceased to exist, while Aaslund (2020) examined a similar initiative in Oslo, where people experiencing homelessness organized and operated daily activities themselves (see also Hoppen et al. 2025).

That such initiatives appear precisely within homeless services invites us to reconsider the potential for co-production. While it is clear, as this dissertation also demonstrates, that a lack of resources and the presence of complex problems complicate co-production, there may also be powerful drivers that make it possible – even under such adverse conditions. The findings of this dissertation suggest that this possibility is driven by an interplay between the nature of the service and the vulnerability of its users.

First, the nature of homelessness services make it conducive to co-production. These are 'people-changing' services (Whitaker 1980; Hasenfeld 2010; Alford 2016), characterized by a high degree of interdependence between service providers and clients; successful outcomes like resocialization or stability cannot be produced for the client, but only with them. Moreover, in the shelter-based programs studied here, the distance to the service provider is especially small, as people already use and stay within these services daily, often for extended periods. This also makes the service highly salient for them. Moreover, across all programs, participation occurs in small, sometimes self-managing groups characterized by intense and lasting bonds between users and frequent in-person communication (Pestoff 2014). This means that although much is expected of participants and involvement is often intensive, co-production is also a logical choice: the salience of these long-term services creates the potential for strong motivation to improve them.

At the same time, service users have little opportunity to choose alternative service providers – and the exit option is sometimes literally the street. Under such conditions, voice and co-production (Fledderus, Brandsen, and Honingh 2015; building on Hirschman 1970) become particularly suitable mechanisms for improving one's service experience. In addition, organizing participation into small groups creates an environment in which participants can monitor each other's contributions, thereby preventing or limiting free-riding and facilitating sustained participation (see also Ostrom 1990). These structural conditions help explain why co-production was worthwhile for participants. Scarcity, which is prevalent in these services, can further act as a driver. Both NuNN and NOIZ originated from dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate shelters for specific groups. Similarly, the visitor–volunteer program partly arose because some drop-in centers relied heavily on volunteers, making it logical to recruit them from within the user group. This provides insight into which service characteristics are suitable for co-production (Cepiku et al. 2021, 117).

This also suggests that co-production may sometimes be particularly suitable for vulnerable groups. People-changing services are often targeted toward people in vulnerable situations (Hasenfeld 2010). Moreover, the findings suggest that co-production may work particularly well for those who do not fit easily within conventional service systems. Both at NuNN and NOIZ, staff and participants emphasized that self-management often succeed precisely for individuals who failed to function in regular, more hierarchical settings – people who are “tired of care”, or people who actively evaded social support. In such contexts, co-production offers an alternative framework that potentially grants autonomy, dignity, and responsibility on one's own terms and allows to build trust. Rather than trying to adapt these people to the system, co-production adapts the system to them, offering a form of inclusion that conventional services often struggle to achieve. These findings invite us to reconsider vulnerability not merely as an obstacle to co-production but also as an imperative for it.

At the same time, we should not overstate the power that service users have in these co-production efforts. While participants, especially in NOIZ and NuNN, take considerable responsibility and control, the service providers remain the principal structurers and final referees of what is permitted in co-production. Even at NuNN – which, by its very nature and structure, attempts to reframe power relationships by aspiring self-management and peer governance – power differences and service users' dependency on staff persist. The theoretical implication is that co-production may make service provision more horizontal, but that the fundamental dependency of these service users – especially when studying vulnerable citizens – continues to

permeate the service relationship. As Tholen (2025, 262) notes, “*the coercive power of the state remains present in co-production*” (also see Reitan 2019). Therefore, future studies should continue to shed light on the inherent power dynamics present between service users and providers in co-production (Gofen, Rønning, and Sønderskov 2025).

14.2.2 The centrality of group dynamics

A second contribution of this study lies in its focus on the role of group dynamics in co-production processes, thereby shifting the conventional emphasis of co-production from a dyadic relationship between users and providers to (also) the social dynamics among users. Strikingly, even within the context of group co-production – where one may expect such dynamics to be central – relatively little is known about how they shape co-production. While some previous studies have noted that internal group dynamics – especially suspicions of free-riding – can influence participants’ motivations or trust (Fledderus 2015; Vanleene et al. 2018), such dynamics generally occupy a marginal position in the co-production literature.

This study, by contrast, suggests that these dynamics should not be seen merely as obstacles to effective co-production. They are inherent in any collective process, and their character is often amplified in services for vulnerable groups, where participants may be dealing with dependency, a lack of resources, or trauma. While group dynamics can complicate co-production, they are also the mechanism that makes it possible: by bringing diverse individuals together, the group generates a collective capacity for co-production that single users may lack. Responsibilities can be shared, participants can support and correct one another, and individuals who would struggle to carry such responsibilities alone can still participate meaningfully. For example, at NOIZ, location managers sometimes select more vulnerable caretakers when they are complemented by more competent caretakers, allowing them to participate according to their capacity and access the shelter this provides. At NuNN, some participants are highly reliable in running their shifts but remain largely silent in meetings, where others take on a more active role. In both cases, it is the group that sustains co-production over time, by distributing roles and tasks, compensating for individual shortcomings, and enabling participation that would be difficult to sustain on an individual basis.

At the same time, group dynamics also have the potential to disrupt co-production. They can foster a sense of belonging and mutual support, but can just as easily entrench informal hierarchies, exclude dissenting voices, or give rise to internal conflict. This dissertation therefore shows that co-production inevitably brings with it the full spectrum of relational dynamics within groups, from solidarity and

mutual support to tension, rivalry, and conflict. Co-production is not necessarily a harmonious process of collaboration; it requires attention to the internal group dynamics through which service users participate, and in which they do not automatically form a cohesive or unified collective.

By foregrounding group *processes*, this dissertation also extends co-production literature beyond the dominant focus on antecedents (e.g., Voorberg et al. 2015; Gascó and Van Eijk 2018; Loeffler and Bovaird 2020, 53; Cepiku et al. 2022) to the relational dynamics that unfold during the process itself. While previous frameworks have acknowledged the importance of relational factors such as trust or shared norms, these are typically conceptualized as preconditions for co-production rather than as evolving dynamics within it – especially between service users. This dissertation, by contrast, highlights a different set of social dynamics that emerge *during* co-production itself. In doing so, the dissertation shifts attention from static, pre-existing conditions of co-production to the dynamic social dynamics that unfold during it. This conceptualizes co-production as a social and relational process, in which the collective dynamics among participants become a central mechanism shaping outcomes. This aligns with the process-oriented perspective advanced by Brix et al. (2020).

14.2.3 Discretion beyond the frontline

The third theoretical contribution of this dissertation is to provide new insight into how co-production transforms frontline dynamics. In classic accounts of street-level bureaucracy, clients are typically portrayed as passive recipients of services (Lipsky 2010). By contrast, Ostrom's work and later public governance scholarship increasingly conceptualize citizens as co-producers of public services and public value (Parks et al. 1981; Ostrom 1996; Osborne 2010; Torfing et al. 2019; Ansell and Torfing 2021; Mortensen and Needham 2023; Van Gestel and Larsen 2025; Larsen et al. 2025). This shift emphasizes responsiveness to citizens' needs and experiences, foregrounding the idea that users possess valuable knowledge about the services that affect their lives. As Mortensen and Needham (2023, 1262) argue, *"this implies a 'radical reinterpretation' of the user-staff relationship which changes from a top-down, one-directional delivery model to a more collaborative relationship based on user empowerment."*

Yet, despite growing attention to relational aspects of frontline work (Bartels 2013; Bartels and Turnbull 2019; Hand and Catlaw 2019; Hupe 2022), street-level research still pays relatively little attention to citizens' active roles within these more collaborative forms of service delivery even as a shift toward co-production is increasingly acknowledged (e.g., Chang and Brewer 2023, 2199; Edri-Peer and

Cohen 2025; Gofen et al. 2025). While recent work (e.g., Ricotta et al. 2025) does reconceptualize citizens as active participants in public encounters, they remain positioned in an institutionally passive role: participation refers citizens actions in interaction with frontline workers, taking the form of compliance, persuasion, opposition, or exit – not to situations in which they are structurally endowed with decision-making. Consequently, this work still tells us little about situations where citizens assume substantial responsibility and decision-making power – effectively placing part of the discretion “*beyond the frontline*” (Needham 2020, 298).

This dissertation pushes this agenda a step further examining co-production in detail and shifting the focus to precisely that transformation. It introduces the concepts of peer discretion and peer governance to denote how co-production can fundamentally reshape decision-making at the street level. Through program structures, participants are empowered to make individual and/or collective decisions that directly affect their peers – sometimes including the right to impose sanctions or even to expel others from the program. Participants thereby exercise discretion over the allocation of benefits and sanctions, roles traditionally reserved for professional staff.

This has pronounced effects on frontline dynamics. Whereas street-level bureaucrats have long been recognized as the primary locus of discretion (Lipsky 2010), in co-production settings, discretion becomes distributed. Participants operate alongside frontline workers within the same organizational environment, facing comparable structural conditions that create discretion, such as value and goal conflicts, limited resources, uncertainty, and information asymmetry (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Zacka 2017). In this sense, they become *street-level co-producers*: lay actors who, like street-level bureaucrats, must weigh competing values and make moral judgments in the provision of services.

This redefines the professional role. Frontline workers are no longer the sole decision-makers or gatekeepers, but facilitators of co-producers who take joint responsibility for decision-making (also see McMullin 2023). Their primary task shifts from direct service provision to enabling an environment in which participants' decisions align with the organization's core service values, through a combination of structuring, guiding, and intervening in the process.

This transformation toward co-production also reshapes the challenges frontline professionals face, recasting classical bureaucratic tensions in a new form. Nowhere is this more evident than in self-managed programs, where professional presence

is intentionally limited and implementation depends heavily on participants themselves. In such settings, frontline workers must rely on co-producers not only to carry out tasks, but also to enforce rules and norms. This distance introduces new dependencies, information asymmetries, uncertainty, and potential moral tensions: frontline workers may be held accountable for discretionary actions or group decisions they neither initiated nor fully endorse. Yet while authority is redistributed and new internal power dynamics emerge within co-produced services, formal accountability for the service as a whole continues to rest with professional staff (see also Jaspers and Tuurnas 2023).

When frontline workers facilitate co-production, but participants' actions and decisions consistently clash with professional norms for longer periods of time, frontline workers may find themselves in what Zacka (2017) calls impossible situations. Impossible situations occur when the sustained emphasis on one set of frontline values at the cost of others damages frontline workers' moral integrity. This, in turn, may lead to feelings of alienation – marked by meaninglessness, powerlessness, and role conflict (Tummers et al. 2009). Such tensions are typically associated with traditional bureaucratic or NPM regimes, where top-down policies, rules, or incentives limit frontline workers to maintain a balanced moral position in service provision that requires them to attend to a plurality of values (e.g., Brodtkin 2011). However, this study shows that in certain co-production settings, such pressures can also arise.

14.2.4 Explaining success: Conditions on multiple levels

Building on this observation, the next contribution shows that co-production is enabled by a set of conditions, rather than individual ones. At first sight, the centrality of group dynamics in the cases might suggest that managing group processes is the single most important lever for making co-production succeed. Yet group dynamics were so decisive here partly because several other enabling conditions were already in place and relatively stable. This underlines that co-production success should be understood as the outcome of a configuration of conditions, rather than a set of individual factors (Bovaird et al. 2016, 64; also see Steen and Tuurnas 2020, 520). Success emerges from conditions on multiple levels, relating to the participant group, program structure, frontline support, and organizational and institutional support. These conditions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Successful co-production requires alignment between a program's ambitions and its supporting set of conditions, as well as among these conditions themselves.

Participant groups

First, the process chapter demonstrated that co-production is fundamentally shaped by the *group* of people involved. The literature on co-production typically treats user-side conditions in individual terms, focusing on participants' motivations, resources, and skills (e.g., Voorberg et al. 2015). The findings of this dissertation suggest that, in group co-production, these individual attributes cannot be studied in isolation. Instead, they should also be seen as a matter of groups.

The first implication is that collective commitment to co-production is crucial. This dissertation argues that what matters for co-production is that a critical mass of participants develops a sense of ownership over the program and identifies with its underlying goals and values (also see Fledderus 2015; McMullin 2024). Co-production can succeed when at least a core of participants genuinely cares about whether the program functions, identifies with its underlying values and goals, and is willing to put in effort to achieve these. This commitment is especially important when professional support is limited and when, therefore, frontline workers must be able to trust participants to act broadly aligned with the program's intentions and values. This commitment is not a fixed precondition for individual people to participate, but something that develops over time – for instance because trust with other service users or professional staff has been built, or because people can latch on to others. It is an emergent property that develops (or erodes) over time and is continually shaped by everyday processes of co-production.

This collective commitment can be built on trusting relationships among service users and between service users and frontline workers. While prior work (e.g., Fledderus and Honingh 2016; Cullingworth et al. 2024) rightly stresses the importance of trust for co-production, the cases here show that, under conditions of vulnerability, this trust has to be built in the context of long-standing distrust toward 'the system' (also see Strokosch and Osborne 2016; Park 2020; Broadhurst 2024, 9). Successful group co-production does not require the absence of distrust – and not all distrust is likely to be eliminated – but it does require that participants have enough trust in each other and in frontline workers to speak, act, and take responsibility. Like commitment, therefore, trust should also be seen as something within groups that is crucial for group co-production.

Third, the findings point to group composition as a distinctive condition. In co-production with vulnerable citizens, participant groups must be open and inclusive enough to reach the intended target population, yet at the same time contain sufficient capacity and complementary personalities to carry the practical work of

co-production and keep social dynamics manageable. While co-production should be inclusive enough to reach their intended target groups, without regard to the balance of capacities and personalities, the group may lack the stability and reliability needed to run shifts, hold meaningful meetings, or uphold basic norms. The appropriate mix therefore depends on the ambition of the program. These insights argue for broadening the analytical scope: rather than viewing the participant side of co-production solely as a set of individual antecedents, in group co-production we should (also) conceptualize the participant group as a distinct enabling condition in which individual antecedents and group dynamics continuously interact. Successful group co-production with vulnerable citizens requires shared commitment, a threshold level of trust, and a group composition that is simultaneously inclusive and sufficiently capable and manageable, calibrated to the ambitions of a specific program.

Program structures

This dissertation also reveals the importance of program structure for enabling such groups and attaining co-production success. While program design has received limited scholarly attention (Sicilia et al. 2017), it fundamentally shapes how co-production processes unfold.

A first crucial implication concerns program structures' mechanisms for inclusion, exclusion, and sanctions. Existing studies discuss mechanisms such as participant recruitment, self-selection (Fledderus and Honingh 2016) or clearly defined membership boundaries that delimit who can benefit from co-production (Brandsen and Helderman 2012, building on Ostrom 1990) in order to arrive at a capable and committed participant group. Less is known, however, about the active sanctioning or even expulsion of people from co-production programs, which appears to be a crucial condition in the initiatives studied here. In much of the literature, the central collective problem is free-riding (Fledderus 2015; Vanleene et al. 2018). In the cases analyzed in this dissertation, by contrast, the more pressing risk is that a small number of individuals can destabilize group dynamics to such an extent that they actively undermine co-production, or even threaten order and safety within a service setting. This makes it necessary for programs to specify not only how people gain access, but also under which circumstances they can be suspended or even banned from a service.

In group co-production settings where professional support is intentionally limited and largely consultative, these boundaries are often enforced through mechanisms of peer discretion and peer governance: participants themselves decide who can enter, who may stay, and when behavior has crossed a line. Program structures thereby

may delegate authority to participants to uphold these boundaries in everyday practice. Co-production works here because groups are – when needed – able to make hard choices about who can continue to participate. This suggests that, under demanding circumstances, co-production is not only a matter of inclusion but also of active exclusion.

Some findings in this study also reinforce what is already established in the literature. Tasks and roles within programs must align with participants' capacities and preferences, in order to enhance users' ease of involvement and the salience they attach to it (Pestoff 2012; Van Eijk and Steen 2016). This corresponds with broader findings that co-production is most successful when programs attend to intrinsic motivations (such as personal satisfaction), social rewards (such as a sense of belonging), and extrinsic motivations (such as financial rewards or access to services).

The cases further illustrate how incentive structures operate in this context. External incentives can serve as useful motivators to stimulate participation. These may take the form of monetary compensation, as seen in the client council and visitor–volunteer programs. In NuNN and NOIZ, direct and highly tangible benefits – such as shelter and prospects for future housing – serve as powerful motivators that often precede intrinsic and social motivations to co-produce. This underscores that incentives must be tailored to the target group (Brandsen et al. 2018, 301-302) and that their effectiveness varies across contexts (Voorberg et al. 2018; Letki and Steen 2021). The cases show that the effectiveness of monetary incentives does not depend solely on the amount offered, but also on participants' alternatives and the meaning they attach to these rewards. This supports Ostrom's (2000) argument that external incentives can strengthen, rather than crowd out, intrinsic motivation when they are experienced as supportive and contextually appropriate rather than as controlling (also see Voorberg et al. 2018, 871).

An important contribution of this study is to demonstrate how program structures embody co-production ambitions and subsequently shape process dynamics. For instance, NOIZ's internal division of responsibilities and rewards generates support and commitment among caretakers themselves by making their contribution visible and consequential. Program characteristics can thus be seen both as outcomes of co-production and as variables that stimulate it.

In sum, this suggests that program design elements must correspond with the capacities and needs of the target population, as well as with the ambitions of the program. While NuNN's processes might operate more smoothly if program

structures imposed higher expectations on volunteers fulfilling their duties, this would compromise the inclusivity of participation and thereby undermine ambitions to reach a specific, relatively vulnerable target group. Conversely, some forms of co-production – particularly those with professional support at a distance and a largely consultative character – require that formal self-regulation mechanisms are placed with the group itself, so that participants can regulate their own membership and behavior. Program structures must therefore strike a balance between openness and control that is calibrated to the specific aspirations and risks of each co-production initiative.

Professional support

Third, successful co-production requires support from frontline professionals. This dissertation contributes to the literature by specifying what street-level work entails within co-production contexts, an area that remains empirically underexplored (Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Tuurnas 2020). I demonstrated that frontline workers shape and sustain group co-production through three types of action: *structuring* (defining programmatic contours and maintaining operational functioning), *guiding* (articulating and transmitting service values such as user ownership, solidarity, and fairness), and *intervening* (protecting safety, inclusion, and organizational legitimacy when co-production falters). Simultaneously, this dissertation also emphasized the importance of restraint, in order to facilitate participants' autonomy and ownership.

This aligns with findings on the importance of frontline workers' skills to motivate and enable service users to participate in co-production, and to weigh and navigate conflicting interests, including balancing user autonomy with other concerns and service values (Bovaird 2007; Steen and Tuurnas 2020, 84). It is important, where possible, to let things run their course in order not to undermine participants' autonomy – and thus to be willing to take risks and accept that not everything can be controlled. Across all cases, professional staff facilitate co-production primarily by building trust and commitment with participants. Rather than curtailing participants' autonomy, they appeal to participants' internal values and sense of responsibility by forming personal relationships, actively extending trust, recruiting participants into co-productive roles, and socializing them into the norms and values the program aspires to, with the aim that participants come to act accordingly. This reflects an approach that seeks to ensure that participants' actions and decisions reflect intended service values by relying on their internal responsibility and values, rather than on external control – an approach that has also been advocated for managing street-level bureaucrats in contexts of information asymmetry and discretion (Zacka 2017, 62). Consider, for instance, the logbook that one drop-in center initially made mandatory for its NOIZ-location but

quickly abandoned because staff felt it risked undermining the sense of ownership and responsibility they were trying to foster among co-producers.

Supporting co-production calls for strong interpersonal and relational skills (Steen and Tuurnas 2018; Tuurnas 2020), but also for group process skills that have so far received little attention in the co-production literature, but are also mentioned in the collaborative governance literature (O’Leary et al. 2012): managing the atmosphere, addressing conflicts, de-escalating tensions, and rebuilding consensus. Conflict is a part of collaboration – and especially in the settings studied here, conflict can flare up easily and visibly. Successful co-production requires, on the one hand, allowing those conflicts to occur, while on the other, resolving them if necessary so they do not undermine the entire process. Frontline workers must also be able to navigate holding back and to assess when intervention is indeed necessary. This role is complex, as co-production requires that professional staff do not necessarily know in advance what the “right” outcome is (see Tholen 2025, 257). Yet they must also be able to judge when co-production has derailed to the point that intervention becomes necessary. This remains a crucial challenge for frontline workers supporting co-production.

This dissertation also sheds light on what motivates frontline workers to engage in co-production. Many frontline workers are motivated to facilitate co-production when they believe in its value for their service users. At NOIZ, the program was able to scale up quickly because staff across the organization shared a strong conviction that it was both necessary and meaningful. At the client council, by contrast, motivation diminished when, for example, a location manager felt that council members did not represent the daily visitors of a drop-in center. Intrinsic motivation does not arise automatically: it must be actively cultivated, for instance through organizational strategies that foreground co-production and the active socialization of new employees, as was visible at NuNN. In this way, the findings provide a concrete answer to Steen and Tuurnas’ (2018, 85) observation that we know little about what motivates frontline workers to engage in co-production, by showing how professional motivation is shaped both by perceived user benefits and by organizational efforts to embed co-production in everyday practice.

Especially when co-production is the central focus of service delivery, the shared ‘practice ideology’ at the frontline should be built around it (Hasenfeld 2010). This is clearly visible at NuNN, where, without a shared belief in the value of self-management, a demanding approach like this would likely not be successfully implemented. Huber (2021, 134) observed a similar strong practice ideology in comparable programs, noting that social workers consistently oriented their choices toward *“what they assessed would benefit the situation the most, in relation to the values and principles of self-management.”* A strong practice

ideology thus offers frontline workers a continuous reference point for deciding when to step back, when to support, and when to intervene in order to safeguard core values and principles.

Organizational support

Fourth, successful co-production depends on organizational support. The findings confirm many conditions already highlighted in the literature, such as staff continuity, professional autonomy and flexibility, managerial commitment, an organizational culture conducive to co-production (e.g., Sicilia et al. 2017; Steen and Tuurnas 2018). At the same time, the findings show that there is no single way to facilitate co-production; DRG employed a model of integrated support, whereas NuNN's approach was almost decoupled from the supporting organization in order to maintain its unique character. Different organizational configurations can thus sustain co-production, as long as they are aligned with the program's ambitions and the particular setting in which it takes place.

Co-production also requires external support and legitimacy. Initiatives like NuNN and NOIZ can only maintain demanding forms of co-production when organizational leaders are willing to absorb the risks that come with granting vulnerable citizens substantial responsibility, and when funders and partner organizations accept the experimentation and occasional failure that accompany such models. At the same time, both models of self-management (as well as the visitor-volunteer program) make service provision for providers more cost-efficient by drawing on user inputs (also see Garlatti et al. 2020).

What this dissertation especially adds is the insight that this space for co-production must be actively and continuously created. Managers and frontline workers invest considerable effort in justifying co-production to internal and external audiences, nurturing relationships with funders, neighbors, and partner organizations, and, where possible, shaping the policy environment in ways that preserve room for autonomy. These active approaches to build program legitimacy seem to have played an especially important role in sustaining these initiatives, which is a question that is increasingly on the agenda of co-production research.

Alignment between ambitions and a set of conditions

Building on scholarship that emphasizes the importance of a combination of conditions for co-production (e.g., Bovaird et al. 2016; Steen 2020; McMullin 2024), this dissertation shows that different constellations of conditions can produce successful co-production. While some general elements – such as a program

structure suited to participants' needs and capacities, and commitment among frontline staff and organizational management – are likely to be essential in any case, the cases of NuNN and DRG demonstrate that multiple routes can lead to success. The overarching contribution, therefore, lies in understanding how successful co-production depends on the alignment between an organization's ambitions to co-produce, reflected in its program structure, and the constellation of supporting conditions that surround it. Different ambitions produce different challenges and therefore require distinct constellations of conditions to succeed.

Program designs express these ambitions and vary along several key dimensions: the complexity and size of the target group, the scope of power and responsibility granted to participants (through mechanisms such as peer discretion or peer governance), and the extent and nature of professional support, ranging from continuous and directive to limited and advisory. These variations reflect different organizational goals and create distinct challenges and risks within programs. The enabling conditions present in a setting must therefore align with these ambitions to cope with these risks and challenges.

For instance, NuNN, which prioritizes participant empowerment and ownership, logically grants participants extensive autonomy and decision-making power. However, this combination of design choices – a large and vulnerable target group, peer discretion and peer governance, and limited consultative professional supervision – also produces more salient and complex group dynamics, and situations where participants' decisions conflict with professional norms or organizational interests. Such a program is difficult to sustain and can realistically function only under the specific enabling conditions present there: staff who hold a strong shared belief in and commitment to the model, who continuously work to build commitment among participants, and who are supported by the organization and its external environment.

By contrast, DRG's self-managed program, more pragmatically aimed at expanding shelter capacity, prioritizes manageability. While the caretakers have quite a high level of peer discretion, the organization reduces uncertainties in co-production by carefully selecting caretakers, keeping groups small, targeting participants without complex care or addiction problems, and opting for directive professional oversight. While staff commitment remains relevant, its depth is likely to be less consequential, as co-production in this form involves fewer uncertainties and risks.

These findings illustrate that design choices in co-production can be understood as mechanisms to reach participants, motivate professionals, and meanwhile also influence and potentially reduce uncertainty in co-production (Fledderus et al. 2015). Each of these mechanisms shapes the degree to which co-production processes remain feasible for different actors involved.

14.3 Methodological implications

14.3.1 Contributions

This dissertation makes two methodological contributions to the literature on co-production. First, Chapter 4 outlined a more fine-grained framework to compare co-production efforts by refining and operationalizing existing analytical frameworks (Nabatchi et al. 2017; Steiner et al. 2018, 2021). While these frameworks were originally developed to categorize and compare co-production efforts at a relatively high level of abstraction, Chapter 4 demonstrates how they can be adapted for more fine-grained comparative analysis. By specifying dimensions and indicators, the framework enables systematic comparison both *between* different co-production initiatives and *within* individual cases. This framework allows for more precise identification of similarities and differences between initiatives, thereby strengthening the comparability and cumulative potential of empirical findings.

Second, this dissertation demonstrates the value of ethnographic research on co-production, especially in group co-production. By studying co-production through participant observation and over extended periods of time, I was able to uncover how key processes – such as group dynamics, trust, and commitment – actually play out and change over time in co-production settings. This suggests that if we want to understand co-production in more detail, further ethnographic work is needed to trace the everyday dynamics of groups, frontline work, and user-provider interaction.

14.3.2 Limitations

As in any research, there are also limitations to this dissertation. Although I have sought to provide a clear and balanced understanding of the cases during fieldwork and analysis, certain challenges may have shaped it. Not all (types of) service users were equally open to participating. At NuNN, for instance, I interviewed only two respondents who were “guests” at the time. While all co-producers had once been guests, and social workers also reflected on this group, this may have excluded an important perspective on how self-management functions. As a result, the views of long-term participants may be overrepresented compared to those of newer or less

active participants. Similarly, additional interviews with non-participating service users at DRG could have been interviewed to gain a more comprehensive perspective. I addressed this risk through triangulation of data sources and methods, but deeper immersion in participants' own perspectives could have yielded additional insights.

A second limitation concerns the longitudinal dimension of the research. At NuNN and the client council, I conducted genuinely longitudinal fieldwork, observing how people and co-production processes evolved. This was less the case at the visitor-volunteer and NOIZ programs, where developments were captured mainly through interviews and, for NOIZ, internal data on participant inflow and outflow. If I were to conduct the study again, I would complement this with more systematic longitudinal observations – such as regular visits or repeated interviews – to trace participants' trajectories over time. More sustained observation, particularly of visitor-volunteers, could have strengthened the analysis. At the same time, this would likely have reduced the range of frontline settings I could study at DRG and, thus, the variation in frontline conditions. This limitation therefore also reflects a trade-off between depth and breadth.

A third limitation is that this dissertation is primarily focused on the success of co-production at the program level. As a result, it cannot offer precise conclusions about whether participation in co-production is personally beneficial for individual participants. Throughout the dissertation, I have occasionally indicated that co-production appears to work well for some people and less well for others. It is also plausible that when co-production is unsuccessful in practice – meaning it does not function as intended – it is less likely to have positive effects for participants. However, assessing participant-level outcomes was not the focus of this research. For that reason, this dissertation cannot make strong claims about the effects of co-production on participants. At the same time, the patterns observed here are broadly consistent with studies that have examined these outcomes more directly (e.g., Huber et al. 2020).

14.3.3 Transferability

A next question is to what extent the findings of this in-depth analysis of two organizations in this dissertation may be relevant for other contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Transferability is generally understood as contingent on the degree of similarity between the cases studied here and the context to which readers seek to apply the findings (Seale 2011). By providing a “thick description” of the cases and their contexts (Geertz 1973; Lincoln and Guba 1985, 125), I aimed to enable readers to

make an informed judgment about this. At the same time, it is possible to identify contexts to which the findings are likely to be particularly transferable.

I expect many of the findings of this dissertation to be transferable to similar forms of group co-production. Because I primarily studied co-production at the micro- and meso-levels, I expect that comparable initiatives in other places and countries will display similar dynamics. First, the findings are most directly transferable to closely related programs, particularly self-managed initiatives involving people experiencing homelessness. Max Huber, Havard Aaslund, and I compared NuNN with two other self-managed initiatives that are no longer active (Hoppen et al. 2025). Based on many of the conditions discussed in this dissertation, we concluded that the sustainability of self-managed initiatives depends on a combination of program structure, professional support, organizational support, and, crucially, the continuous creation of (external) support and mutual commitment. This suggests that at least the importance of these conditions for co-production is transferable to similar contexts. I further expect my findings to be relevant for other forms of collective, user-driven co-production with vulnerable populations. Examples can be found in mental health services, such as consumer-run organizations (K. Brown et al. 2008) and community clubhouses (Spitzmueller 2018). These initiatives often target similar populations and, like homeless services, are characterized by “people-changing” goals (Hasenfeld 2010). The tensions, professional challenges, and alignment conditions identified in this dissertation are therefore likely to resonate in these settings as well.

Additional transferable findings include the dynamics of peer discretion and (peer) governance, the transformation of the professional role, and the enabling conditions for co-production. These findings are expected to be most relevant for forms of co-production that take place in group settings, grant participants substantial autonomy and influence, and target vulnerable citizens. Accordingly, the theoretical implications of this study are particularly salient for analyzing cases of user-driven co-production (Park 2020).

Some caution is warranted regarding the transferability of this dissertation's findings to examples of individual co-production. Much of the existing literature on co-production with vulnerable citizens focuses on individual-level interactions between service providers and clients (e.g., Hand 2018; Brandsen et al. 2024). My findings on co-production processes (especially Chapters 8 on group dynamics), as well as those concerning conditions at the level of the participant group, are therefore less easily translated to studies of individual co-production. For other chapters, however, I do expect the findings to be transferable, as these primarily address collaborative

dynamics that may also emerge in interactions between service providers and individual clients.

14.4 Avenues for future research

This dissertation aimed to provide insights into how co-production with vulnerable citizens can work in practice and under what conditions it may succeed. As just argued, we have learned much in this dissertation, relating to the nature of group co-production with vulnerable citizens, the importance of group dynamics, the mechanisms programs contain and professional staff use to manage these group dynamics, and the conditions that enable co-production efforts to pursue their intentions. These insights also open up several promising avenues for future research.

First, future studies could build on this dissertation's operationalization of program structures to examine whether, and to what extent, fluctuations between intentions and practice occur across co-production initiatives. The same framework could also be used to study co-production as a dynamic phenomenon, tracing how programs evolve over time and along particular dimensions – such as participant roles, professional involvement, or rationales – through longitudinal research (see also Bos, Zwaan, and Brandsen 2025). Finally, this operationalization provides a foundation for comparative studies, enabling systematic cross-case analysis of how program structures shape the implementation of co-production in different organizational and policy contexts.

Second, future research should further unpack the co-production process. This dissertation has shown that when responsibility is genuinely transferred to participants, co-production can fundamentally transform frontline relations between citizens and the state. To analyze this, I introduced the concepts of *peer discretion* and *peer governance* to describe how participants exercise decision-making power over other service users and each other. Against this background, it would be useful to examine not only the benefits of peer discretion and peer governance for participants, but also the potential psychological and moral costs they may experience in co-production (Thomsen et al. 2020).

Future studies could also explore whether similar mechanisms are present in other contexts. Some evidence suggests they are. In self-governing APAC prisons in Brazil, NGO-administered, faith-based institutions rely heavily on prisoners and local volunteers to jointly run daily routines, provide peer support, and even participate

in disciplinary decisions (Darke 2014). Much as in the self-managed programs studied in this dissertation, mechanisms of peer discretion and peer governance seem central: prisoners make formalized decisions about other service users, including benefits and sanctions. Historic and contemporary “trusty” systems in the United States offer a potentially darker counterpoint. Traditionally, these systems delegated significant control over prison labor, discipline, and order to a small elite of prisoners who were rewarded with privileges for enforcing rules on others (McWhorter 1976; Wright and May 2017). Recent investigations into a contemporary trusty program in Mississippi, again highlight this dual potential: former trusties describe life-changing access to work-release jobs, courses, and closer relationships with staff, but the same accounts document extreme dependency, unpaid or dubiously compensated labor, opaque decisions over privileges and sentence length, and even the recruitment of trusties as enforcers to abuse other inmates (Joshi and Quinn 2025; Howey, Joshi, and Rosenfield 2025). Of course, this case seems first and foremost a story of abuse and corruption rather than straightforward example of co-production. I do not invoke them to redefine these practices as co-production, but to highlight how similar structural devices – formalized peer roles, inmate hierarchies, and delegated discretion over others – can be harnessed either for mutual support and rehabilitation or for coercion and exploitation. In this sense, they function as extreme counterparts to the initiatives studied in this dissertation and, seemingly, to APAC. To my knowledge, these kinds of user-based governance arrangements have not yet been systematically examined in the co-production literature. Such cases would provide a highly interesting case to study the dynamics that were seen here due to the similarities in the service (e.g., also living together), the target group (tend to be vulnerable, especially in dependent relationship with service providers), and the seemingly high levels of user empowerment through peer discretion and peer governance. They offer extreme test cases for examining how different constellations of these conditions shape whether user-driven co-production tilts toward mutual support and shared ownership or toward dependency and exploitation.

Turning to professional support, this dissertation demonstrated that frontline workers structure, guide, and intervene in co-production. Future research could connect these findings to existing work on professional roles in co-production (Vanleene et al. 2018, 2020; Mortensen 2020) – how frontline workers combine them, or how certain roles may conflict with one another – or to theory on role conceptions of street-level bureaucrats (Zacka 2017), to better understand how they navigate the tension between enabling user autonomy and safeguarding other service values.

Third, future research could further develop and apply the model of enabling conditions for co-production to other contexts. The notion of *alignment* between program ambitions and facilitating conditions raises important new questions. Are there specific conditions that become more or less critical depending on the type of co-production ambition pursued? This dissertation suggests, for instance, that initiatives granting greater user power, involving larger and more vulnerable groups, and relying on a limited, consultative professional role may be more prone to internal conflict and professional challenges. Such programs are harder for organizations to control and may therefore require more professional commitment to the co-production model itself. Future research could examine these dynamics more systematically; for example, by comparing professional attitudes across different types of co-production initiatives.

Furthermore, this dissertation underscored that the design of co-production programs plays a crucial role in enabling and sustaining co-production. Program structures – encompassing target groups, activities, roles, decision-making procedures, and forms of professional support – shape how co-production takes form. Yet, as noted by Sicilia et al. (2017), program design remains an underexplored dimension in co-production research. Future work could therefore examine which design features most effectively promote sustained participation and balanced autonomy.

To better understand group co-production efforts like NuNN, we could return more to Ostrom's ideas about design principles for sustainable collective self-organization and the design of institutions that enhance citizenship (Ostrom 1990; 2000). For initiatives like NuNN, where participants share management and governance responsibilities, Ostrom's (1990) design principles for collective self-organization provide a valuable analytical framework. As this group co-production is essentially a form of the (self) organization of collective action, the findings can be compared with Ostrom's (1990) design principles. Especially for programs such as NuNN, where participants assume an active role in the management and governance of a service, Ostrom's framework offers a promising analytical lens. Although these principles were originally developed to explain the capacity of groups to self-organize the management of common-pool resources such as fisheries, they have since been applied to a wider variety of collective arrangements, including neighborhoods and educational programs (Wilson et al. 2013). At NuNN, several of Ostrom's (1990, 90) design principles can be observed in practice. The shelter and its program have clearly defined boundaries; participants take part in collective decision-making; peer monitoring is embedded in daily routines; and accessible mechanisms exist for conflict resolution. Moreover, professional staff, the organization, and the wider environment recognize participants' right to self-organize,

and coordination takes place with both the organization and the municipality. Applying Ostrom's framework could therefore help future research identify which combinations of design principles make co-production possible in similar contexts. These structural conditions should, however, be seen as a starting point. As this dissertation showed, for instance, professional support and participant commitment are essential for sanctions to be applied in the first place, and for ensuring that they are implemented gradually and consistently.

Finally, this dissertation conceptualized the success of co-production primarily as a matter of alignment between intentions and practice. This analytical focus, however, means that the question of whether co-production also leads to effective or desirable outcomes for participants themselves remains beyond the scope of this dissertation. Although some evidence in this dissertation suggests that co-production can foster resocialization and foster more sustainable pathways out of homelessness, these should be studied in further detail. It is thus essential to note that successful co-production – as defined here – does not necessarily translate into successful service provision or universally positive experiences for participants.

14.5 Implications for practice

Beyond its theoretical and methodological contributions, this dissertation also has implications for policymakers and public service providers seeking to pursue co-production with vulnerable groups.

14.5.1 Facilitating co-production: Creating commitment to practices and values of a program

The first implication concerns the role of (especially) frontline workers and frontline managers in facilitating co-production. Across the cases studied here, they were the primary actors who kept co-production viable in day-to-day practice. The analysis reveals that professional support in these settings consists of a twofold process of creating commitment.

The first layer of support involves creating commitment to the recurring practices of co-production. Even when authority is formally transferred to users, co-production does not become self-sustaining by design (also see McMullin 2024): frontline workers must do sustained work to recruit service users and stimulate their commitment to the recurring practices through which co-production is enacted – showing up, taking up responsibilities, and actually using the influence they are formally granted, which

does not happen automatically. Professional support of co-production, therefore, requires consistent work to create commitment to the practices of a co-production initiative among participants. For practitioners, this implies that the first hurdle is ensuring that the ‘doing’ of co-production becomes a shared routine.

The second, and more complex process of creating commitment starts when participants actually take up this role. Once participants are in a position to influence decisions, the challenge resembles a familiar one in public governance: how to ensure that people with discretion act in ways that remain consistent with core service values (such as safety, fairness, and continuity) without reverting to tight external control, as this would undermine co-production (e.g., Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017).

My findings show that practitioners can address this by relying on strategies that have also been advocated in the street-level bureaucracy literature. A key strategy observed involved investing in relationships, building trust, and socializing participants into the program’s ideals and values, so that participants would gradually internalize these and act accordingly. Rather than prescribing every decision or steering every action, frontline workers sought to shape participants’ underlying orientation. This suggests that Zacka’s (2017, 62) argument that value-based management is needed to steer frontline workers under conditions of information asymmetry and discretion can also be applied by practitioners to co-producing service users.

The residents’ meetings at NuNN illustrate how practitioners can implement this via casuistic reasoning. In these meetings, difficult questions about sanctions or rule interpretation are discussed by reasoning through concrete cases together. This illustrates the practical value of the casuistic reasoning Zacka (2017) advocates: by jointly working through specific situations, participants and frontline workers articulate what counts as a justified response in light of the initiative’s core values. Such meetings make participants’ decisions more transparent, can distribute responsibility within the group, and may gradually calibrate participants’ discretionary judgments to the program’s core values. In doing so, the meetings serve as a concrete tool for frontline workers to help align participants’ decisions and actions with the broader purposes of the program without reverting to tight external control.

14.5.2 Designing programs

Balancing ambitions and manageability

This dissertation offers practical guidance for organizations that design co-production initiatives with vulnerable citizens. Across the cases, structural program design choices

shaped how co-production unfolded, including: (1) group composition and size; (2) the capacities and vulnerabilities of the target group; (3) the degree of responsibility and decision-making authority delegated to participants; and (4) the extent and nature of professional support. These design choices are consequential and should fit an organization's ambitions – particularly its underlying rationale for co-production – and the level of uncertainty the organization is willing and able to manage.

Programs that aim for empowerment and participant ownership can consider incorporating peer governance or peer discretion mechanisms. When organizations do this, they must prepare for inherent uncertainties: participants may make decisions that conflict with professional norms or organizational interests. Without this willingness to navigate tensions, empowerment will not be achieved in practice. Conversely, co-production can also be made more manageable through design mechanisms that reduce complexity. DRG's NOIZ illustrates how smaller groups, more selective participation (for example, limiting vulnerability levels within the group), and more directive professional support can make co-production more predictable and easier to sustain.

This underlines that there is no single best way to organize co-production. Instead, organizations should consciously align design choices with their ambitions and with the level of uncertainty they are prepared to absorb, and whether the enabling conditions to do this – e.g., resources, organizational culture, organization-wide commitment and external support – are in place to facilitate this.

Still, this need not be a one-off blueprint (also see McMullin 2024). Effective, sustainable programs are typically adaptive: they need to make room to learn from implementation and experimentation. In other words, designing co-production is not only about choosing a suitable program model, but also about building the capacity to adjust that model over time.

Autonomy requires boundaries A next, somewhat counterintuitive lesson is that clear rules and boundaries can enable substantial freedom and participant autonomy because they stabilize the process. NuNN provides the clearest illustration. Participants had far-reaching autonomy, few strict rules (e.g., on substance use), with limited professional oversight. Yet the program enforced its small set of ground rules through potentially hard sanctions.

This suggests that, the more responsibility programs give participants, the more often active exclusion becomes necessary – most clearly at NuNN and DRG's NOIZ.

Ambitious co-production remains workable only when disruptive dynamics can be sanctioned and, where necessary, excluded. Similar patterns appear in programs in other sectors, where much attention to participant selection (and exclusion) seems essential to enable workable autonomy (Nyvoll 2025, 31). Clear and credible boundaries thereby enable autonomy rather than restrict it (Huber 2025, 93).

Capitalizing on groups Finally, the cases also suggest that group co-production may be especially well-suited to involving vulnerable citizens (also see Passavanti et al. 2016). Group co-production can create forms of collective capacity that may be difficult to generate through individual co-production: responsibilities can be shared, participation can be sustained through mutual support, and accountability can be exercised peer-to-peer. At the same time, group dynamics can be volatile and may amplify conflict and peer pressure. This makes organized mechanisms to regulate groups essential.

14.5.3 Embracing uncertainty and the limits of control

A final practical implication concerns what it takes for policymakers and organizational managers to sustain far-reaching co-production initiatives such as NuNN and NOIZ. These initiatives operate differently from regular services or even more conventional co-production arrangements. Especially an initiative like NuNN redistributes influence to participants in ways that do not fit neatly with standard managerial routines or policymakers' expectations. As a result, they cannot be sustained through resources alone. They also require explicit authorization and continued backing when tensions arise.

The cases suggest that these initiatives can have clear advantages. They may reach a segment of the target group that is not well served by regular services, and they can offer a relatively low-cost response to persistent public problems by mobilizing user commitment and collective responsibility. However, the very attractiveness of these benefits can tempt policymakers into a specific trap. While developments toward co-production are frequently accompanied by rhetoric about democracy, empowerment, and inclusion, giving the impression that the state is stepping back, Trommel (2018) argues that this is not necessarily the case. Participatory governance agendas can also be interpreted as a form of 'greedy governance': an excessive governing mentality that mobilizes and responsabilizes citizens and civil society organizations as instruments in the pursuit of administrative interests (54-55, 72).

In this view, co-production risks becoming a tool for the state rather than a space for the citizen. The findings of this dissertation suggest that for co-production to have

genuine value, policymakers must resist this instrumentalizing urge. Meaningful user autonomy inevitably produces uncertainty and friction, and it may require tolerating deviations from conventional organizational or municipal routines. Co-production may become particularly challenging when user decision-making power conflicts with existing authorities, as seen at NuNN, where municipal funding does not always translate neatly into control. At the same time, NuNN remains viable *because* users can make decisions that occasionally go against professional or organizational preferences, and because its approach does not always align with municipal policy. DRG's NOIZ, in turn, succeeds also because it retains full authority over participant and user selection. By contrast, comparable initiatives often dissolve when policymakers and managers withdraw their support once the challenges of sustaining autonomy – and the lack of direct control – become too demanding (Huber, 2020; Hoppen et al. 2025).

The central lesson is that policymakers cannot reap the benefits of co-production, such as empowering vulnerable groups, without also accepting the inherent uncertainty and limited control that define these initiatives. Those who wish to sustain such initiatives must therefore provide not only resources, but also the backing when things become difficult – and, first, the space for difficulties to surface without immediate restrictive intervention. While there may be legitimate reasons to seek some degree of coordination across municipal services or to ensure that service providers operate under comparable standards, policymakers cannot expect such co-production initiatives to deliver results without accepting that they will sometimes conflict with bureaucratic expectations.

Empowerment is only meaningful if it also includes the possibility that participants make choices policymakers, managers, and professionals themselves would not have made. Controlling such initiatives too tightly risks undermining the autonomy and commitment that make co-production valuable in the first place (Brandsen et al., 2017; Trommel, 2018). Sustaining such initiatives therefore also requires administrative modesty: knowing when to intervene – and, especially, when restraint is essential.

14.5.4 The potential for co-production to improve homelessness services

This dissertation shows that co-production (particularly in the form of self-management) can, under the right conditions, offer a practical and complementary way to improve homeless services. While not a substitute for professional care or permanent housing, self-managed initiatives can provide small-scale, short-term shelter that is closely attuned to participants' needs and, in some contexts, even expand capacity with relatively limited resources. In this sense, co-production may

fit well within current policy ambitions to move toward Housing First, by bridging the gap between housing goals and the continuing need for temporary shelter.

In the Netherlands, recent policy increasingly frames homelessness as a housing issue rather than primarily a care issue. The National Action Plan on Homelessness explicitly aims to move people as quickly as possible from the street or shelter into permanent housing and to phase out traditional emergency shelters. In practice, however, municipalities and service providers still depend heavily on temporary accommodation: night shelters and crisis facilities remain full, waiting lists are long, and many people continue to move between different forms of short-term shelter (Akkermans et al. 2023). This creates a tension: while national policy steers toward housing solutions, frontline organizations must still offer safe, low-threshold places for people who have nowhere else to go.

The cases in this dissertation suggest that co-production can help navigate this tension in two concrete ways. First, self-managed programs may be particularly well-suited for people who do not want to, or cannot, adapt to the routines and restrictions of mainstream shelter services. For this group, arrangements that provide more freedom and responsibility can be more workable and can also create a pathway toward independent housing, precisely because participants already practice autonomy and responsibility while staying in the shelter. In that sense, self-managed shelters may support recovery for people whose situation involves more than “only” a housing problem. At the same time, as emphasized throughout this dissertation, these programs are not suitable for everyone. The implication is therefore not that self-managed shelters should replace all conventional facilities, but that its potential may be larger than is currently used, while remaining appropriate for a specific subset of the broader shelter population.

Second, the NOIZ initiative demonstrates that, under the right conditions, co-production can contribute to additional shelter capacity with limited resources. Where feasible, similar initiatives could help maintain shelter capacity while allowing municipalities to redirect funds toward housing-based solutions rather than expanding institutional shelters. However, co-production should not be viewed merely as a cost-saving measure or as a way to shift responsibilities onto vulnerable people. For those who value this form of small-scale, self-managed shelter, it can represent a more dignified and cost-effective alternative. This finding is consistent with earlier studies showing that self-managed shelters tend to operate at lower costs than conventional facilities (Tuytman and Huber 2014, 16). This suggests that co-production can be both instrumental and, when done well, a desirable goal in and of itself.

14.6 Closing remarks: What makes co-production with vulnerable citizens different?

Finally, we can reflect on an underlying question of this dissertation: is co-production with vulnerable citizens – such as homeless people – fundamentally different from ‘regular’ co-production? In some respects, it is not. Co-production remains possible when the right conditions are met, and those conditions largely mirror what we already know from the literature (e.g., Voorberg et al. 2015; Sicilia et al., 2019). Yet the cases examined here also reveal significant differences that make co-production with vulnerable groups both more demanding and potentially more valuable.

Undoubtedly, vulnerability may complicate co-production and presents additional barriers and challenges, as other authors have noted (Broadhurst 2024). Firstly, the problems and limitations faced by the target group can hinder or complicate their participation. For example, people sleeping rough are much less able to participate in co-production due to the basic lack of sleep and shelter, as was shown with DRG. But other issues that can affect people – such as addiction or mental health problems – can influence people’s capacities and motivations in the process of co-production and can also affect how groups function.

Moreover, there is an inherent dependence that persists in co-production, which complicates the process for both participants and the professionals who facilitate it. In programs such as NuNN and NOIZ, participants rely on the organization for necessities like shelter. In the client council and visitor-volunteer program, participants may depend on it for some income. This dependence cannot be entirely removed: while co-production may flatten hierarchies and expand user autonomy, it also redistributes dependency from professionals to peers. Participants depend on each other’s cooperation, while professional staff retain ultimate authority to intervene, enforce, or withdraw support. Co-production thus cannot abolish the power asymmetries that are inherent to so many public services (e.g., Lipsky 2010; Hasenfeld 2010). Instead, by helping people relieve some problems, new dependencies may be created – among participants themselves or from participants on their program.

These dynamics are further complicated in co-production by the heterogeneity of capacities, norms, and value orientations within such programs. Therefore, professionals must bridge divides, manage conflict, and weigh user autonomy against other service values such as fairness, inclusion, and safety. When participants’ decisions directly affect other vulnerable individuals for whom professionals remain

accountable, the challenge becomes even greater. Building trust and commitment under these circumstances is demanding, continuous work, which requires constant efforts, and which will not always be successful. This is not always easy – but difficulty is no reason to abandon the attempt.

In fact, this dissertation offers a fundamentally hopeful message. Too often, vulnerable citizens like the homeless are viewed primarily through the lens of their deficits (also see K. Brown 2011; Park 2020; Broadhurst 2024; K. Brown 2024; Wolf and Jonker 2020, 40): as people who cannot handle responsibility, do not know what is good for them, and therefore need to be managed or controlled. The cases in this dissertation show the opposite. They demonstrate that when people are trusted, treated as partners, and provided with a structure that accommodates their (collective) needs and capacities, they are capable of taking on significant responsibility – from managing a night shelter to shaping organizational policy. In doing so, co-production offers people the opportunity to positively shape their own lives and those of others.

Co-production therefore holds specific potential for vulnerable groups precisely because of their position vis-à-vis the system. In services where lives are marked by dependence, stigma, and social isolation (Broadhurst 2024), participation in co-production can do more than improve service quality; it can act as a catalyst for recovery and reclaiming agency. By enabling people to take action themselves, co-production helps develop routines and skills. This approach is not ‘soft’ or naïve – as we have seen, it can be surprisingly hard. Rather, it reflects Wolf and Jonker’s (2020, 41) insight that socially excluded people should be fully accepted as citizens and, therefore, treated with respect, while simultaneously being held accountable for their actions – by professionals *and* their peers.

For all these reasons, co-production with vulnerable citizens carries higher stakes than more regular forms of co-production: it involves risks of failure, but also the possibility of more profound transformation. When co-production is designed around people’s realities – through group arrangements that build collective capacity, boundaries that make autonomy workable, and professional support that is willing to guide without taking over – people can take on more responsibility than often expected. Ultimately, the lesson is not that co-production with vulnerable citizens is possible despite their vulnerability, but that it is precisely their vulnerable position within service settings that makes co-production worth striving for.



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Appendices

Appendix 1. Overview of research participants

Table A.1 Respondents at NuNN

Research participants	Abbreviation	Interviewed (XX=twice)	Interview length (minutes)	Focus group
Frontline worker 1	F1	X	80	X
Frontline worker 2	F2	XX	120; 60	X
Frontline worker 3	F3	X	91	
Frontline worker 4	F4	X	170	X
Frontline worker 5	F5	X	165	X
Frontline worker 6	F6	X	170	X
Frontline worker 7	F7	X	116	X
Frontline worker 8	F8	X	120	
(Former) Frontline worker 9	F9	X	103	
Co-producer 1	CP1	X	25	
Co-producer 2	CP2	X	54	
Co-producer 3	CP3	X	25	
Co-producer 4	CP4	XX	60; 90	
Co-producer 5	CP5	X	40	
Former co-producer 6	CP6	X	90	
Co-producer 7	CP7	X	37	
Co-producer 8	CP8	X	45	
Co-producer 9	CP9	X	45	
Co-producer 10	CP10			X
Co-producer 11	CP11			X
Co-producer 12	CP12			X
Guest 1	C1	X	60	
Organization's director	M1	X	55	
Organization's manager	M2	X	60	
Municipal policy advisor	R1	X	60	
Frontline worker partner organization	R2	XX	83; 50	
Frontline worker partner organization	R3	X	85	
Frontline worker partner organization	R4	X	30	
Municipal policy advisor	R5	X	60	
Former voluntary board chair of NuNN and director of RIBW	R6	X	60	

Table A.2. Respondents at DRG

Research participants	Abbreviation	Interviewed (XX=twice)	Interview length (minutes)	Member check meeting
Drop-in center manager	FM1	X	86	
Drop-in center manager	FM2	X	45	X
Drop-in center manager	FM3	X	80	
Drop-in center manager	FM4	X	60	
Drop-in center manager	FM5	X	60	
Drop-in center manager	FM6	X	50	
Co-producer 1 (NOIZ)	CP13	X	70	
Co-producer 2 (NOIZ / VV)	CP14	XX	45; 50	
Co-producer 3 (NOIZ)	CP15	X	50	
Co-producer 4 (NOIZ / VV)	CP16	X	35 (group)	
Co-producer 5 (NOIZ / VV)	CP17	X	35 (group)	
Co-producer 6 (NOIZ / VV / CC)	CP18	X	40	
Co-producer (CC / VV)	CP19	X	80	
Co-producer (VV – CC)	CP20	X	40	
Co-producer (VV – CC)	CP21	X	30	
Co-producer (VV – CC)	CP22	X	45	
Co-producer (VV – CC)	CP23	X	60	
Co-producer (VV – CC)	CP24	X	85	
Co-producer (CC)	CP25	X	40	
Co-producer (CC)	CP26	X	35	
Co-producer (CC)	CP27	X	85	
Co-producer (CC)	CP28	X	45	
Frontline worker in drop-in	F10	X	65	
Frontline worker in drop-in	F11	X	55	
Frontline worker in drop-in	F12	X	45	
Frontline worker in drop-in	F13	X	40	
Social worker	F14	X	70	
Social worker	F15	X	60	
Social worker	F16	X	55	
Social worker	F17	X	35	

Table A.2 Continued

Research participants	Abbreviation	Interviewed (XX=twice)	Interview length (minutes)	Member check meeting
Organizational advisor manager / director	M3	XX	60; 60	
Organizational manager / advisor	M4	XX	60; 90	
Organizational manager / advisor	M5	X	50	
Organizational manager / advisor	M6	X	70	X
Organizational manager / advisor	M7	X	60	
External advisor	EA1	XX	90; 40	X
External advisor	EA2	X	45	
Voluntary advisor	EA3	X	30	
Voluntary advisor	EA4	X	45	
Municipial advisor	R7	X	60	
Municipial advisor	R8	X	(group)	
Municipial advisor	R9	X	(group)	
Municipial advisor	R10	X	(group)	

Appendix 2. Data management

The data in this dissertation were collected with participants' permission. For all interviews and focus groups, participants provided explicit informed consent. Prior to each interview, the informed consent form (see Appendix 3 for an example) was discussed with participants and signed.

For participant observations, I did not use written informed consent forms, nor was it possible to obtain consent from every individual present. This is a well-known issue in ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 211). I did not consider this feasible, nor appropriate to the setting, where large numbers of people could be present and group compositions sometimes changed substantially. Nevertheless, at NuNN, staff members and the residents' group provided oral approval for the study during a meeting. At DRG, approval was granted by the general manager of the drop-in centers and the organization's research coordinator. Furthermore, the location managers of the specific drop-in centers granted permission to do research in those specific locations, and all councils whose meetings I attended granted permission for observations after I explained my research to them. At the start of each period of participation, I explained the study and verbally clarified how I would handle research materials, in line with the guidelines described in the informed consent form. On that basis, I obtained permission from the individuals and groups in the settings where I observed.

In addition, I sought to distribute information about my research as widely as possible. At NuNN, I introduced myself personally to almost everyone and explained that I was a researcher. At DRG's drop-in centers, I also distributed letters – aimed at service users – in which I introduced myself, explained the study, and provided my contact details in case people had questions.

I sought to minimize the identifiability of the research materials by pseudonymizing statements and leaving out personal details about individuals – such as physical appearance and biographical details – unless they were analytically essential to understanding a specific situation. At the same time, I aimed to remain as transparent as possible about the empirical context. Because NuNN and DRG would in any case be recognizable based on their basic organizational characteristics, I chose to use the organizations' real names. The names of research participants, however, were always pseudonymized. This does not change the fact that, given the richness of the data, full anonymization is difficult in practice. Combinations of details could allow involved actors to recognize one another in excerpts, particularly in meeting vignettes. This

risk is relatively limited because those involved were themselves present in these interactions. Therefore, I selected only quotes and vignettes that were unlikely to be sensitive.

During the research, the data were stored on secure Radboud University servers. After completion of the study, the data will be stored for ten years in the Radboud Data Repository. Given the sensitivity of the materials, they will not be shared. Access will only be granted in exceptional circumstances, for example if serious concerns arise regarding the integrity of the research.

Ethics approval was granted by the Ethics Assessment Committee Faculty Law and Nijmegen School of Management (EACLM) of Radboud University Nijmegen (approval number: 2022.13).

Appendix 3. Example of an informed consent form

U bent uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan een onderzoeksproject over de maatschappelijke opvang en inloopvoorzieningen. Het onderzoek is gericht op zelfbeheer en gebruikersparticipatie. Dit onderzoeksproject wordt uitgevoerd door Menno Hoppen (de hoofdonderzoeker) van de Radboud Universiteit en begeleid door Taco Brandsen en Marlies Honingh.

De vragen gaan over hoe u gebruikersparticipatie ervaart en hoe dit wordt ingevuld bij de Regenboog. Het gesprek duurt ongeveer een half uur á drie kwartier. Er wordt een opname van het interview gemaakt. Na het interview zal het interview uitgetypt worden door de hoofdonderzoeker. Als u dat wil, zal daarna de geluidsopname vernietigd worden.

Wat wij doen met persoons- en onderzoeksgegevens

De volgende persoonsgegevens zullen worden verzameld: uw voornaam, verblijfplaats en uw telefoonnummer of e-mailadres. Uw telefoonnummer of e-mailadres wordt gevraagd, zodat de hoofdonderzoeker u kan benaderen wanneer er vragen of onduidelijkheden bestaan. De persoonsgegevens versleuteld worden opgeslagen in een bestand waar alleen de hoofdonderzoeker bij kan. Dit bestand wordt direct na het onderzoek verwijderd.

De onderzoekers zullen de onderzoeksgegevens gebruiken voor wetenschappelijke tijdschriften en presentaties. Daarbij zullen wij pseudoniemen gebruiken zodat personen onherkenbaar zijn. De onderzoeksgegevens zullen veilig worden opgeslagen volgens de regels voor het beheer van onderzoeksgegevens van de Radboud Universiteit. De gegevens zijn daar verder voor niemand bereikbaar. Alleen wanneer er grote twijfels bestaan over de integriteit van het onderzoek kunnen ze gecontroleerd worden door andere onderzoekers. Na tien jaar worden de onderzoeksgegevens verwijderd.

Transcriptie door derden

Mogelijk laat de hoofdonderzoeker de interviews transcriberen (uittypen) door student-assistenten of een daarvoor bestemd bedrijf. In dat geval zal er altijd met geheimhoudingsverklaringen gewerkt worden, zodat uw data anoniem blijft.

Vrijwillige deelname

Uw deelname aan dit onderzoek is vrijwillig. Dit betekent dat u uw deelname en toestemming op elk moment tijdens de periode van het verzamelen van gegevens kunt stopzetten en terugtrekken. U hoeft daarvoor geen reden te geven. Tot zes weken na deelname kunt u uw onderzoeksgegevens laten verwijderen door een verzoek te sturen naar menno.hoppen@ru.nl.

We willen u alvast hartelijk danken voor het deelnemen aan dit onderzoek. Uw deelname helpt om de kennis over zelfbeheer vergroten en kan daarmee een bijdrage leveren aan de maatschappelijke opvang in het algemeen.

Meer informatie

Heeft u vragen over dit onderzoek, nu of in de toekomst, neem dan contact op met Menno Hoppen; 06xxxxxx; menno.hoppen@ru.nl – Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen.

Als u klachten heeft over dit onderzoek, neem dan contact op met de onderzoeker of neem contact op met de vertrouwenspersonen voor academische integriteit via email: vertrouwenspersonen@ru.nl. U kunt ook contact opnemen met de Commissie Wetenschappelijke Integriteit van de Radboud Universiteit. De secretaris van de commissie is (...) Bestuurlijke & Juridische Zaken.

Meer informatie over de Commissie Wetenschappelijke Integriteit vindt u hier: <https://www.ru.nl/over-ons/overradboud/integriteitsbeleid/wetenschappelijke-integriteit/>

TOESTEMMING

Door ondertekening van dit formulier geeft u aan dat:

- u deze informatie hebt gelezen en begrepen
- u vrijwillig instemt met deelname
- u ten minste 18 jaar bent

Ik wil dat de audio-opname van het interview wel/niet vernietigd wordt na het interview (doorstrepen wat niet van toepassing is).

Als u niet wilt deelnemen aan het onderzoek, kunt u de deelname weigeren door dit formulier niet te ondertekenen

datum, naam & handtekening:

E-mailadres / telefoonnummer:

Appendix 4. Topic lists interviews

Interviews with social workers

1. Introduction
 - Theme introduction
 - Informed consent process
2. Background
 - Role, experience, education
3. Frontline Work
 - Daily work and tasks
 - Workload
 - Frontline accountability procedures
 - Professional attitudes
 - Role conceptions (what is most important in your work)
 - Client perceptions
 - Policy perceptions (relevant policies, contribution of policies to societal goals, ideal-version of shelter system, discrepancy with current situation)
 - Discretion
 - Level of autonomy in work
 - Work-related rules and procedures
 - Frontline dilemma's
4. Co-production
 - Explain self-management
 - Goal and rationale of self-mangement; theory of change
 - Participant selection for self-management
 - Function of the residents' meeting and other central moments for self-management
 - Handling unsuitable choices by the group
 - Expectations from participants
 - Rules associated with self-management
 - User motivations for self-management
 - Rewards and sanctions
 - Suitability of self-management for service users
 - Influence of self-management on service delivery
 - Role of social workers in self-management
 - Differences self-mangement ← → Regular services
 - Pros and cons of self-management
 - Main challenges for social workers and coping strategies

- Adaptation/change of self-management throughout the years
- 5. Organization
 - Vision on the function/value of this shelter in the municipality
 - Employee relations with the supporting organization
 - Autonomy of the shelter $\leftrightarrow$ organization
 - Supporting organizations' commitment to self-management
 - Management prioritization of self-management
 - Accountability structures
- 6. Funding
 - Funding sources
 - Funding requirements and flexibility
- 7. Environment
 - Relationship with the municipality
 - Municipality's impact on self-management
 - Shelter's involvement in policymaking and advocacy
 - Interactions with other key organizations
- 8. Conclusion
 - Unaddressed aspects of self-management
 - Additional questions or comments

Topic list interview co-producers

1. Introduction
 - Introducing the theme
 - Informed consent
2. Background
 - Length of stay at shelter
 - Reasons/causes for going to this shelter
3. Self-Management
 - What is self-mangement
 - Differences between NuNN and other service providers
 - Motivation: Reasons for participating in self-management
 - Experiences of self-management (positive, negative, challenges)
 - Activities fulfilled in self-management
 - Variations in how volunteers approach their tasks
 - For whom is self-management (not) suitable
 - Involvement in decision-making
 - Residents meeting: experiences, challenges, and experienced influence
4. Relationships between residents
 - Resident interactions during the week
 - Conflict resolution among residents
5. Professionals
 - Interaction with support staff
 - Key roles of support staff for self-management
 - Relationship between residents and office staff
 - Positive experiences, negative experiences, conflicts
6. Conclusion
 - Unaddressed self-management aspects
 - Additional questions or comments
 - Thank you

Appendix 5. House rules for residents at NuNN

House Rules

As a guest of NuNN, you are required to observe the following house rules:

- Violence, aggression, discrimination, and threats toward guests, volunteers, managers, and support staff are strictly prohibited and will not be tolerated. Show respect for each other!
- Possession of weapons is not allowed. Weapons must be surrendered upon entry.
- Theft, possession of stolen goods, or drug dealing is strictly forbidden.
- A reasonable suspicion of violating these house rules may lead to expulsion.
- Disruptive behavior on the street or near NuNN will not be tolerated.
 - “The appearance of the street is our appearance, too.”
- You are responsible for keeping your assigned sleeping area clean.
 - “Bed in, clothes off!”
- You must shower at least twice a week.
- You are required to change your bedding and wash your clothes at least once a week.
- No feet on the couches, and do not walk barefoot around the building.
- Dinner takes place at 5:30 p.m. in the living room.
- You must eat dinner in the living room; eating in your bedroom is not allowed.
 - “Wash your hands first, or no food.”
- If you do not adhere to hygiene rules, you may be addressed by volunteers, managers, or support staff.
- NuNN is open from 5:00 p.m. to 10:00 a.m. daily, except on Sundays, when guests may stay until noon. However, rooms must be cleaned by then.
- Quiet hours are from 10:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m.
- On weekdays, no entry is allowed after midnight.
- On Fridays and Saturdays, no entry is allowed after 2:00 a.m.
- It is not allowed to stay in the living room after midnight.
- Guests are not permitted to receive visitors inside NuNN. Family members are an exception, but only for volunteers between 10:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m.
- If you plan to be away for one or more nights, please inform a volunteer.
- Being absent for three consecutive nights without notice will result in losing your bed! Regular absences of three nights are not allowed, as it indicates that the shelter is no longer needed.

- As a guest, you can get tested for tuberculosis (TB) by contacting the Municipal Health Service at (...). NuNN may also request that you take a TB test.
- If you are not registered with [social housing provider], you must register as a housing seeker within one month.
- NuNN accepts men aged 18 and older for a Maximum stay of three months. Extensions are only possible if there is evidence of substantial effort to find work and/or more suitable accommodation. For those aged 18-23, an individual assessment will determine the best option. First, contact must be made with [other service providers].
- NuNN offers guests the option to store valuable documents and medication for safekeeping. However, no one can be held liable for loss.
- After a two-week stay, you can be provided with a mailing address by reporting to the office.

Appendix 6. Agreement of intent client participation DRG

Agreement of intent regarding client participation and representation

Representatives of participants and visitors of De Regenboog Groep, along with the organization itself, express their mutual intention to establish a high-quality framework for client participation and representation. This agreement of intent serves as a preamble to the collaboration agreement and forms an integral part of it.

Objective

The objective of client participation is to engage as many clients as possible in the organization's activities. Representation is viewed as the formal structure in which advising and decision-making processes related to organizational policy are established.

Conditions

- The current legislation, WMCZ (Participation in Care Institutions Act), serves as the foundation for the collaboration agreement.
- Both parties aim to professionalize participation and representation.
- Collaboration is based on mutual trust and respect.

Expectations

a. The Organization

- Ensures timely communication and involvement of councils in decision-making processes.
- Facilitates independent support for the various councils.
- Location heads play an active role in supporting representation efforts.
- Ensures councils have access to relevant information.
- Allocates a budget for the training and education of council members.
- Encourages and facilitates the recruitment of potential candidates for the councils, for example:
 - Among visitors via location heads.
 - Among participants via employees/volunteers providing coaching or support.

b. The Councils

- Actively inform their constituents about discussions held in various meetings.

- Are responsible for engaging their constituents and gathering input for council decision-making.
- Actively recruit potential candidates for the various councils.
- Promote broad participation among visitors and participants within the organization.

Collaboration Agreement

The councils and the organization will review the attached collaboration agreement in greater detail. This agreement will be signed by both the councils and the organization within four months of signing this memorandum of intent.

Appendix 7. Caretaker role and rules

Caretaker role and rules

The Caretaker is responsible for the daily/night course of events in the NOIZ.

- If a participant does not follow the rules and does not allow himself to be called to account, the Caretaker has the authority to deny the participant access for one night.
- The next morning, he reports the incident to the Location Manager.
- The Caretaker takes care of the building and is responsible for leaving the common spaces tidy every day.
- The Caretaker informs the Location Manager about needed supply (e.g., coffee and tea) and needed maintenance in the common spaces and facilities.

The Caretaker agrees to the following rules:

- Respectful interaction with other participants of the NOIZ
- No use of drugs/alcohol
- No smoking inside
- Bringing your own food and drinks
- Leave the room tidy
- Do not bring others to the NOIZ
- Possession of a valid BHV-certificate or willingness to follow the BHV-training
- Report problems to the location manager and follow instructions'



Nederlandse samenvatting

Samenvatting van het proefschrift

In dit proefschrift stel ik de vraag onder welke condities co-productie met kwetsbare burgers – specifiek in de maatschappelijke opvang – kan slagen. Uit het onderzoek blijkt dat co-productie met kwetsbare burgers niet alleen mogelijk is, maar dat er succesvolle initiatieven bestaan waarbij dakloze mensen een mate van verantwoordelijkheid en zeggenschap nemen, die zelfs in reguliere co-productie-trajecten niet vanzelfsprekend is.

De achtergrond van dit onderzoek is dat beleidsmakers en publieke dienstverleners de burger steeds meer zien als actieve partners in plaats van passieve ontvangers van publieke dienstverlening. Dit ideaal van *co-productie* belooft betere, effectievere en democratischere diensten. Ook in sectoren die met kwetsbare burgers werken, zoals schuldhulpverlening, maatschappelijke opvang of jeugdzorg, zijn zulke ambities wijdverspreid. Het doel van co-productie is vaak om diensten beter te laten aansluiten op de wensen en behoeften van gebruikers door hen een actieve stem te geven in het proces. Tegelijkertijd bestaat er scepsis: is dit realistisch met deze groep, waarbij machtsverschillen, ongelijkheid, wederzijds wantrouwen en een stapeling van persoonlijke problemen co-productie kunnen bemoeilijken?

Het theoretisch kader bespreekt zowel het potentieel als de risico's van co-productie in contexten met kwetsbare burgers. Empirisch bewijs hierover is schaars en dat wat er is laat een wisselend beeld zien: co-productie kan werken, maar voorbeelden waarin de praktijk volledig succesvol is zijn zeldzaam. Succes wordt hier gedefinieerd als: de mate waarin de dagelijkse uitvoering van een co-productieprogramma aansluit bij de onderliggende intenties. Om dit te verklaren wordt onder andere gebruik gemaakt van de lens van *street-level bureaucracy*, die inzicht biedt in hoe de structurele uitdagingen van het dagelijks werk van frontlijnwerkers de interactie met burgers vormgeven in publieke dienstverlening. Dit resulteert in een analytisch kader waarin randvoorwaarden worden onderzocht op vier niveaus: de deelnemersgroep, programmastructuur, professionele ondersteuning en organisatie(omgeving).

Het onderzoek is gebaseerd op uitgebreid etnografisch veldwerk bij twee Nederlandse instellingen voor daklozenopvang: de Nachtopvang uit Noodzaak Nijmegen (NuNN) en De Regenboog Groep (DRG) in Amsterdam. Beide organisaties onderscheiden zich door hun vergaande ambities om gebruikers bij de dienstverlening te betrekken. Dankzij langdurige participerende observaties, interviews, en documentenanalyse

konden de dagelijkse praktijk en dynamiek van co-productie van binnenuit worden onderzocht – inclusief de perspectieven van dakloze mensen zelf.

De studie richt zich op vier programma's. Bij NuNN runnen en besturen bewoners de opvang deels zelf via een model van zelfbeheer. Bij DRG worden bezoekers op drie manieren betrokken: als meewerkend bezoeker, via cliëntenraden, en als huismeesters van kleinschalige opvanglocaties in zelfbeheer. Door deze uiteenlopende vormen te vergelijken wordt zichtbaar hoe programma's van elkaar verschillen, in hoeverre de praktijk de intenties weerspiegelt, welke sociale processen dit verklaren en welke condities bepalend zijn voor succes.

De analyse laat zien dat de programma's in grote lijnen functioneren zoals bedoeld. Of het nu gaat over bewoners die samen een opvang runnen, dakloze bezoekers die meewerken in inloophuizen, of cliënten die meebeslissen in raden; er is daadwerkelijk sprake van co-productie. Dit betekent niet dat dit feilloos gaat: elk programma kent knelpunten. Niet altijd wordt de gewenste doelgroep bereikt, niet iedereen blijkt geschikt voor deelname, deelnemers voeren taken niet altijd naar tevredenheid uit, en het is soms moeilijk om besluiten te nemen. De kernbevinding is echter dat al deze programma's er vaak en consistent genoeg in slagen om als succesvol te kunnen worden beschouwd.

Wel is er veel fluctuatie in de dagelijkse praktijk, die wordt gedragen door een samenspel van sociale processen, vooral binnen groepen die samenleven en samenwerken. Enerzijds geeft de groep wederzijdse steun, onderlinge correctie en een sterk gevoel van eigenaarschap. Co-productie komt juist van de grond omdat mensen elkaar meenemen en motiveren. Anderzijds ontstaan risico's als groepsdruk, kliekvorming, vriendjespolitiek of escalerende conflicten, waardoor een proces soms kan ontsporen.

Kenmerkend voor sommige programma's is dat ze mechanismen hebben waarmee die groepsprocessen worden gestructureerd en waardoor groepen worden geholpen zichzelf te reguleren. Dit proefschrift gebruikt twee concepten om deze mechanismen te analyseren:

- *Peer discretion*: deelnemers nemen zelfstandig besluiten die gevolgen hebben voor andere gebruikers, soms zonder aanwezigheid van professionals;
- *Peer governance*: deelnemers nemen gezamenlijk besluiten over regels, sancties, beloningen en toegang tot het programma.

Deze mechanismen verschuiven een deel van de discretionaire macht van professionals naar deelnemers en vormen daarmee een fundamentele hertekening van de frontlijn. Kwetsbare burgers nemen verantwoordelijkheden op zich – inclusief morele dilemma's – die traditioneel zijn voorbehouden aan professionele staf. Dit verandert ook de rol van frontlijnwerkers, die nu processen structureren, richting geven en achteroverleunen balanceren met ingrijpen wanneer waarden als veiligheid, inclusie of legitimiteit in het geding komen. Dit brengt nieuwe uitdagingen met zich mee rond waardenconflicten, afhankelijkheid en onzekerheid, en de vraag hoe professionals verantwoordelijk blijven zonder altijd controle te hebben.

Toch zijn deze processen vaak succesvol, omdat condities op meerdere niveaus goed op elkaar aansluiten. Dit proefschrift laat zien dat geen enkele voorwaarde op zichzelf voldoende is; succesvolle co-productie vraagt om een samenspel van vier groepen voorwaarden die aansluiten bij wat een programma wil.

- **Deelnemersgroep:** Succesvolle co-productie vereist een groep met voldoende collectieve capaciteit, onderling vertrouwen en betrokkenheid bij het programma. Die samenstelling moet voldoende inclusief zijn om nieuwkomers te absorberen, maar ook voldoende stabiel en complementair om taken te vervullen en groepsdynamiek positief te houden. Dat betekent ook dat die groep soms beschermd moet worden door mensen uit te sluiten die de veiligheid of dynamiek ondermijnen.
- **Programmastructuur:** Structuren moeten deelname mogelijk maken via een passende mix van prikkels, kansen voor persoonlijke ontwikkeling en mechanismen voor selectie, inclusie én uitsluiting waar nodig. Deze grenzen zijn essentieel om co-productie beheersbaar, veilig en duurzaam te houden.
- **Professionele ondersteuning:** Co-productie gaat niet vanzelf. Toegewijde ondersteuning is cruciaal. Hun rol verandert fundamenteel: ze zijn geen uitvoerders meer, maar ondersteuners die deelnemers werven, vertrouwen bouwen en deelnemers motiveren om zich de activiteiten, cultuur en waarden van een programma eigen te maken, zonder daarin te directief te zijn.
- **Organisatie(omgeving):** Organisaties bieden de praktische middelen voor co-productie, zoals geld, training en voorzieningen. Even belangrijk is een interne cultuur en structuur die frontlijnwerkers de rugdekking, continuïteit en handelingsvrijheid geeft om co-productie te ondersteunen. Extern is het zaak om politieke en financiële steun te behouden, wat vraagt om actieve lobby en het blijven uitleggen van de meerwaarde van deze werkwijze, zodat externe betrokkenen hier, waar nodig, hun werkwijze op kunnen aanpassen.

Al met al laat dit proefschrift zien dat co-productie met kwetsbare burgers de gangbare aannames overstijgt. De studie toont dat kwetsbaarheid niet slechts een belemmering is, maar juist een aanleiding kan vormen om mensen weer regie te geven over hun eigen leven en directe omgeving. Hoewel dit succes niet vanzelfsprekend is en continu onderhoud vraagt, biedt het onder de juiste voorwaarden een waardevol alternatief voor traditionele vormen van dienstverlening.

English summary

In this dissertation, I address the question of under which conditions co-production with vulnerable citizens – specifically within homeless services – can succeed. The findings show that co-production with vulnerable citizens is not only possible, but that successful initiatives exist where homeless individuals take on a level of responsibility and influence that is not even a given in mainstream co-production initiatives.

The background of this research is that policymakers and public service providers increasingly view citizens as active partners rather than passive recipients of public services. This ideal of co-production promises better, more effective, and more democratic services. Such ambitions are widespread in sectors working with vulnerable citizens as well, such as debt counseling, homeless services, or youth care. The goal of co-production is often to align services more closely with the wishes and needs of users by giving them an active voice in the process. At the same time, skepticism persists: is this realistic for vulnerable groups, where power imbalances, inequality, mutual distrust, and an accumulation of problems may hinder co-production?

The theoretical framework discusses both the potential and the risks of co-production in contexts involving vulnerable citizens. Empirical evidence on this subject is scarce, and existing literature shows a mixed picture: co-production can work, but examples where practice is fully successful are rare. Success is defined here as: the extent to which the everyday practice of a co-production program aligns with the underlying intentions. To explain this, the lens of street-level bureaucracy is used, among others, which offers insight into how the structural challenges of the daily work of frontline workers shape the interaction with citizens in public service delivery. This results in an analytical framework in which conditions are examined at four levels: the participant group, program structure, professional support, and organizational (environment).

The research is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork at two Dutch institutions for homeless services: *Nachtopvang uit Noodzaak Nijmegen* (NuNN) and *De Regenboog Groep* (DRG) in Amsterdam. Both organizations distinguish themselves by their far-reaching ambitions to involve users in service delivery. Through long-term participant observation, interviews, and document analysis, the everyday practice and dynamics of co-production could be examined from the inside – including the perspectives of homeless people themselves.

The study focuses on four programs. At NuNN, residents partly run and govern the shelter themselves through a model of self-management. At DRG, visitors are involved in three ways: as visitor-volunteers, through client councils, and as caretakers of small-scale self-managed shelter locations. By comparing these diverse forms, it becomes clear how programs differ, to what extent everyday practice reflects intentions, which social processes play a role in this, and which conditions are decisive for success.

The analysis shows that, overall, the programs function as intended. Whether it concerns residents running a shelter together, homeless visitors working in drop-in centers, or clients participating in decision-making councils; co-production is genuinely taking place. This does not mean it is flawless: every program faces bottlenecks. The desired target group is not always reached, not everyone proves suitable for participation, participants do not always perform tasks satisfactorily, and decision-making can be difficult. However, the core finding is that all these programs succeed often and consistently enough to be considered successful.

There is, however, significant fluctuation in daily practice, driven by an interplay of social processes, especially within groups that live and work together. On one hand, the group provides mutual support, peer correction, and a strong sense of ownership. Co-production takes off precisely because people engage and motivate one another. On the other hand, risks such as peer pressure, clique formation, cronyism, or escalating conflicts can arise, sometimes causing a process to derail.

Characteristic of some programs is that they have mechanisms to structure these group processes and help groups regulate themselves. This dissertation uses two concepts to analyze these mechanisms:

- **Peer discretion:** participants independently make decisions that affect other users, sometimes without the presence of professionals;
- **Peer governance:** participants collectively make decisions about rules, sanctions, rewards, and access to the program.

These mechanisms shift a portion of discretionary power from professionals to participants, representing a fundamental redrawing of the frontline. Vulnerable citizens take on responsibilities – including moral dilemmas – that are traditionally reserved for professional staff. This also changes the role of frontline workers, who now balance structuring processes, guiding directions, and ‘leaning back’ with intervening when values such as safety, inclusion, or legitimacy are at stake. This

brings new challenges regarding value conflicts, dependency, and uncertainty, and the question of how professionals remain accountable without always having control.

Nevertheless, these processes are often successful because conditions at multiple levels align well. This dissertation shows that no single condition is sufficient on its own; successful co-production requires an interplay of four groups of conditions that match what a program aims to achieve:

1. **Participant group:** Successful co-production requires a group with sufficient collective capacity, mutual trust, and commitment to the program. The composition must be inclusive enough to absorb newcomers, yet stable and complementary enough to fulfill tasks and maintain positive group dynamics. This also means the group must sometimes be protected by excluding individuals who undermine safety or dynamics.
2. **Program structure:** Structures must enable participation through an appropriate mix of incentives, opportunities for personal development, and mechanisms for selection, inclusion, and exclusion where necessary. These boundaries are essential to keep co-production manageable, safe, and sustainable.
3. **Professional support:** Co-production does not happen automatically. Dedicated support is crucial. Their role changes fundamentally: they are no longer implementers, but supporters who recruit participants, build trust, and motivate participants to adopt the activities, culture, and values of a program without being overly directive.
4. **Organization (environment):** Organizations provide the practical means for co-production, such as funding, training, and facilities. Equally important is an internal culture and structure that provides frontline workers with the backing, continuity, and discretionary space to support co-production. Externally, it is vital to maintain political and financial support, which requires active lobbying and continuously explaining the added value of this approach so that external stakeholders can adapt their own methods where necessary.

All in all, this dissertation demonstrates that co-production with vulnerable citizens transcends common assumptions. The study shows that vulnerability is not merely a barrier, but can actually provide a rationale for restoring agency to people over their own lives and immediate environment. While this success is not self-evident and requires continuous maintenance, under the right conditions, it offers a valuable alternative to traditional forms of service delivery.

About the author

Menno Hoppen earned his Bachelor's degree in History from the University of Groningen and completed his Master's in Public Administration (specializing in Comparative Politics, Administration, and Society) at Radboud University, graduating *with honors* in 2020.

From 2020 to 2025, he served as a doctoral researcher and lecturer in Public Administration, focusing his research on the involvement of vulnerable citizens in co-production. During this period, he published the following works:

- Hoppen, Menno, Taco Brandsen, and Marlies Honingh. 2025. "Conditions for Involving Vulnerable Citizens in Co-Production: The Importance of Commitment." *Public Management Review*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2523953>.
- Hoppen, Menno, Max Huber, and Havard Aaslund. 2025. "What Makes Co-Production Sustainable? A Comparative Case Study of Three Self-Managed Homeless Programs." *Public Management Review*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2025.2534724>.
- Steen, Trui, Taco Brandsen, and Menno Hoppen. 2024. "Can Co-Production That Emerged during the COVID-19 Pandemic Be Sustained?" In *Research Handbook on Public Management and COVID-19*, edited by Helen Dickinson, Sophie Yates, Janine O'Flynn, and Catherine Smith. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781802205954.00018>.

Alongside his research, he took an extensive role in education, teaching BA and MSc courses such as Academic Skills, European Governance, EU Governance in Practice, and Societal Public Administration, as well as providing thesis supervision.

Since January 2026, Menno has served as a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Department of Public Administration and Political Science at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He works alongside Kristina Weißmüller and Gjalte de Graaf on the VALUE-AI project, which investigates how public organizations can implement AI while governing risks in a manner that strengthens public values.¹

¹ <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/nrcnd21088>

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