



Co-creation

For services to reduce social deficits, address longstanding social debt,¹ and not result in failure demand² downstream they have to be effective – they need to address the real problem in the right way. One of the best ways to increase the odds of a service's success is by involving the people and communities who are impacted by the situation in the process of identifying the problem, designing the services that will address it, and establishing how the services will be evaluated. This is co-creation.

Too often, however, this is not what happens. Due to capacity challenges, timing constraints, and deeply entrenched ways of working, public servants who have technical expertise but are disconnected from the on-the-ground reality of situations are charged with defining the problem, developing solutions, and establishing the evaluation criteria. Additionally, these public servants may be aware they are operating under unspoken constraints and propose the best approach that they believe decision-makers will support, not what they think is the best approach overall.

Governments also often rely on superficial engagement and consultation, which erodes public trust. Co-creation will not only result in better services but will also increase public trust in government. This, in turn, can help ensure that evidence-based decisions and investments in effective services are resistant to being cut or altered without good reason. To ensure value for money, good services alone are not enough—they must be consistently available over time with changes based on users' needs and not government preference.

The conditions for co-creation are already being fostered in the civil service through processes like gender-based analysis and work being done by the Innovation and Design Services Unit. The community sector³ also can offer invaluable support to government in better understanding on-the-ground realities and building relationships with impacted people and communities so that co-creation is possible. The sector also has experience in many of the skills and approaches used in co-creation, though it rarely uses design language

¹ Imagine Canada (a charitable organization that provides programs, services, and accreditation to charities; advocates for the charitable sector federally; and promotes corporate giving) uses the term social deficit to describe “the gap between projected demand for the services of charities and nonprofits, and the financial resources available to them.”* The Women's Council builds on this term by applying it to gaps between what is needed and what is available in terms of services provided by charities, nonprofits, as well as government. For more information, see the Women's Council's publication on social deficits and debts, available at nbwomenscouncil.ca.

* Emmett, Brian. (2019, May). What Does the Federal Budget Tell Us About Canada's Social Deficit? Retrieved from <https://www.imaginecanada.ca/en/360/what-does-federal-budget-tell-us-about-canadas-social-deficit>

² In Lean Six Sigma, failure demand is “the delivery or production of products and services downstream, as a result of defects in the system upstream.”*

* Lean Consulting. Failure Demand. Retrieved from <https://leanconsulting.com/lean-resources/lean-six-sigma-white-papers/failure-demand/> on February 24, 2020

to describe them (user-centred, for example, would be “meeting people where they are at” in community sector parlance). Additionally, many of the principles of entrepreneurship that government admires and are useful in co-creation processes, such as being lean or agile, are also fundamentally embedded in community organizations seeking to advance social causes—again, they are simply using different language to describe it.⁴ The expertise and effectiveness of the sector is undeniable: in the Women’s Council’s [Resonate](#) initiative, which surveyed over 1 300 women in New Brunswick, the most common answer to a question on what is working well to improve the lives of women in the province was community-based organizations—government came in second.⁵

Despite all that it can offer, the community sector largely has a transactional relationship with government in which it receives (often insufficient) funding to deliver services; on the whole, it is not engaged adequately for its expertise or its ability to connect government to people and communities impacted by issues (the existence of this sector is, in fact, often not even acknowledged in government’s significant speeches). Resonate found that one of the main struggles that community-based organizations face is engagement with government.

³ The Women’s Council uses community sector to refer to community-based charities and non-profits and umbrella organizations that unite them, but not larger non-profit para-public institutions like universities, hospitals, or nursing homes.

⁴ Thomas, Hanna. (2019, September). Why Don’t We Just Call Agile What it is: Feminist. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@Hanna.Thomas/why-dontwe-just-call-agile-what-it-is-feminist-8bdd9193edba>

⁵ New Brunswick Women’s Council. (2019, November). Indigenous Women in New Brunswick. Retrieved from https://resonatenbresonances.ca/Resonate_Indigenous_women.pdf