

# Underpinning principles and ways of working that enable co-production: Reviewing the role of research



Learning paper #7

January 2018



*Participants share co-production experiences; December 2017/photo Jonny Crabb*

## Executive Summary

Within their research and learning support role for two BRACED-funded projects, King's College London hosted a workshop to review the role of research in co-production for resilience building. The forum, held in London December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, included representation from BRACED consortia as well as the Fund and Knowledge Managers, together with members of complementary resilience-building consortia bringing together academics and practitioners<sup>1</sup>.

Discussion highlighted that co-production requires shifts in donor, academic and practitioner cultures. Investment in resilience building needs to be for extended periods. Research institutions need to develop reward systems that value researchers' and practitioners' engagement in co-production. Co-production for resilience building also necessitates increased recognition of the centrality of those at risk as active partners in building co-production cultures, agendas and activities.

Participants saw the greatest opportunity to enhance outcomes through the articulation of a common strategic vision that can imagine joined-up mechanisms to support co-production across contexts, activities and institutions to maximise capacity building, influence and impact. It was recognised that, in the area of applied disaster risk research, the UK is a co-production leader and that other national and regional research institu-

tions and donors are actively moving towards this way of working, providing scope for scaling up. This process is timely and can build on extensive project-level experience, capturing the momentum of the considerable range of initiatives currently funded by DFID and other national and international bodies, to institutionalise co-production as a form of knowledge production and action. To facilitate scaling-up requires a wider strategic conversation than is being had at present; a conversation that can be bottom-up as well as top-down, to bring in all partners to reflect on the labour market and how to support science and practice careers in co-production. Developing a strategy that can enable the growing of long-term relationships yet encourage innovation and the challenging of established ways of thinking and doing.

To help facilitate a common conversation, and drawing on operational experience and emerging learning in this field, participants in the workshop together developed a vision of the underpinning principles and ways of working that enable co-production to support resilience-building. While the forum surfaced considerable areas of agreement (as outlined below), it also highlighted areas where views differ, particularly with regard to the need to localise co-production and review how best to invest in building sustainable capacities for co-production.

### Box 1: Underpinning principles and ways of working that enable co-production

Principles to apply during the development and initiation of a project:

- Partners jointly identify an issue where they can productively work together to address a concern prioritised by the people whom an initiative seeks to support.
- All partners factor in sufficient time and resources to support the required steps in the process of co-production, including building common ground to understand each other's ways of working.
- While expecting and accepting differences and tensions, partners reach a shared vision and common purpose.
- The respective knowledges of each partner are explicitly recognised as vital to enable effective resilience-building.
- Partners jointly agree the principles and ways of working that will underpin their collaboration, ensuring that co-production roles and responsibilities are clearly mapped out, communicated, resourced and integrated across the project process and that the people whom an initiative seeks to support have an active research role.
- Partners explicitly recognise their differing agenda and incentives and negotiate an impact plan that meets the requirements of all partners, prioritising tangible benefits for those whom the initiative seeks to support wherever feasible.

Principles to apply throughout a project:

- Socially-relevant research outputs are continuously produced.
- Access to project knowledge is open.
- Research is undertaken in a culturally-relevant, locally validated and accountable way.

- Researchers appropriately communicate the levels of certainty and confidence of the risk information they provide.
- Research approaches recognise different learning styles, different ways and spaces for interacting with the social and physical environment (such a cognitive, emotional and spiritual factors) different entry points and pathways for informing and influencing decision makers
- There is continual impact assessment at all decision-making levels and within both policy and scientific arena.
- Opportunities are afforded for continuous formal and informal review and learning
- Partners commit to act on emerging learning, seek address for emerging and unaddressed issues of concern, revise plans and approaches and to end, document and share learning about co-production initiatives that are not proving effective.
- The project retains sufficient flexibility to address emerging concerns, bringing in additional areas of expertise, employing new approaches and commissioning additional research, where required.

Towards the end of a project:

- Partners identify, document and share learning about those processes, approaches and ways of working that support effective co-production processes to continue in the longer-term.
- Project learning informs ongoing and future research, development and resilience-building priorities.
- Project learning feeds into wider strategic conversations.

## Introduction

This briefing note draws together emerging learning from co-production initiatives that seek to strengthen the resilience of people directly impacted by climate risks. While drawing on existing literature concerning co-production, the note is principally based on the experience and expertise<sup>2</sup> shared during a workshop co-hosted by King's College London within the research and learning support provided to two consortia projects funded by the DFID Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes (BRACED) programme.

The one-day workshop aimed to:

- Analyse the role of co-production in bringing research and practice together in resilience-building initiatives;

- Learn how the different consortia projects have been set up to achieve better resilience-building outcomes;
- Reflect on the changing demands that new ways of working place on partners and the impact of co-production on project outcomes, and;
- Explore new ways to build better relationships and ways of collaborating to achieve better resilience outcomes (current and future)

Emphasis was placed on keeping the agenda adaptive and flexible, allowing ideas to be developed free from rigid time constraints. The day was also designed to support a journey or process, whereby each session built on the last to arrive at new ideas

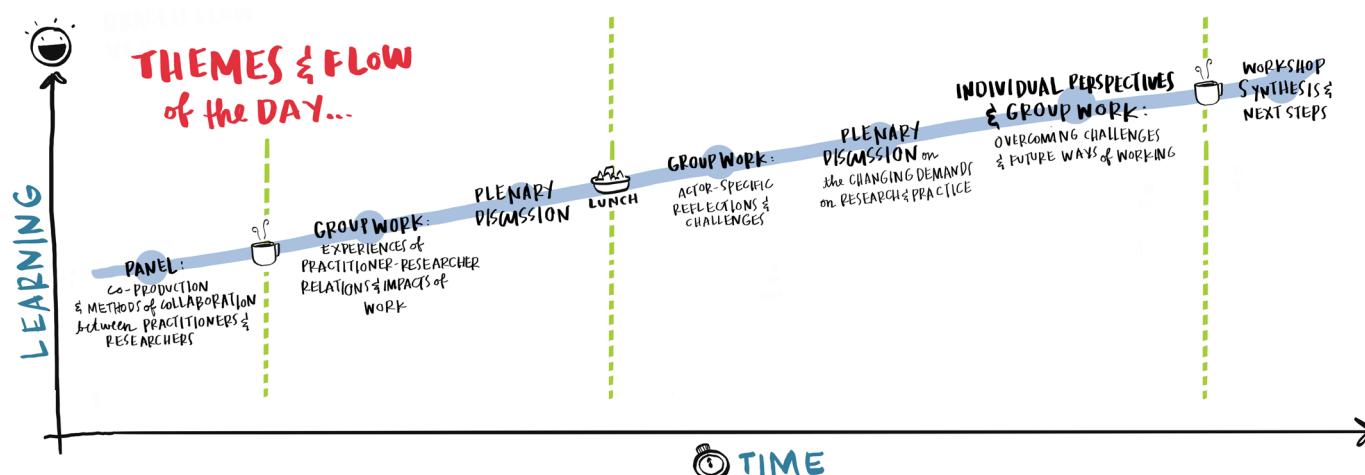


Image 1: 'The impacts of co-production in resilience building: Reviewing the role of research' workshop content; illustration, Fernanda de Uriarte (Crabb Consulting)

and creative thinking for future ways of working. Key sessions were also live scribed, with this visual reporting creating a record of the forum. The workshop's overall agenda and individual sessions were developed in collaboration with two knowledge-management consultants, employing a range of participatory approaches designed to support individual and group sharing, learning and critical review.

The event discussion and this learning paper build on, but also question, some aspects of emerging learning about how to support co-production for resilience building. Particularly noted was the need to localise co-production and invest in building capacities for co-production as close as possible to those people whom a resilience building initiative seeks to support as part of a strategic evolution in co-production from a set of project-level activities towards an integrated institutional and professional pathway for learning-based action.

## What is co-production?

In relation to its engagement across a number of resilience-building initiatives, KCL has developed the following working definition: Co-production is the bringing together of different knowledge sources, experiences and working practices from across different disciplines, sectors and actors to jointly develop new and combined knowledge<sup>3</sup> for addressing societal problems of shared concern and interest.

Co-production is about establishing frameworks which recognise our complementary areas of expertise and articulate how, where and when we can usefully work together to address a specific societal concern. It recognises the need to support ongoing learning and continuous channels for dialogue. It is not about knowledge transfer, one-off workshops

or one-way 'dissemination' to 'end users' who lack opportunities to provide feedback.

For co-production to succeed, everyone needs to get something out of it. Partners involved in co-production need to recognise their differing incentives for engaging in collaboration and jointly negotiate a plan that addresses their respective impact requirements.

**Co-production is a process** but not all projects will start at the same point and not all actors will be involved at each step in the process. Co-production does not mean we need to do everything together all the time. We need to identify where co-production is likely to add benefit.

Among the steps in the process, co-production includes:

**Building a common understanding.** Co-production often involves individuals within organisations who have little or no previous experience of working together. It requires developing an understanding of each other's ways of working, areas of expertise and value systems<sup>5</sup>. It is as much about developing academics' understanding of decision-makers and decision-making contexts as it is about strengthening decision makers' understanding of relevant scientific or academic knowledge. This step is often missed out.

Building a common understanding also requires discussion of the underlying principles of how we can work together (see further Section 4 below) and developing an impact plan that meets partners' respective impact requirements which need to be reflected in the overall project budget.

**Co-exploration<sup>6</sup> and co-identification of an issue of direct concern to the lives of the people whom an initiative seeks to support and where partners can productively work together:** Partners jointly explore decision making contexts and needs and together identify an issue where they can



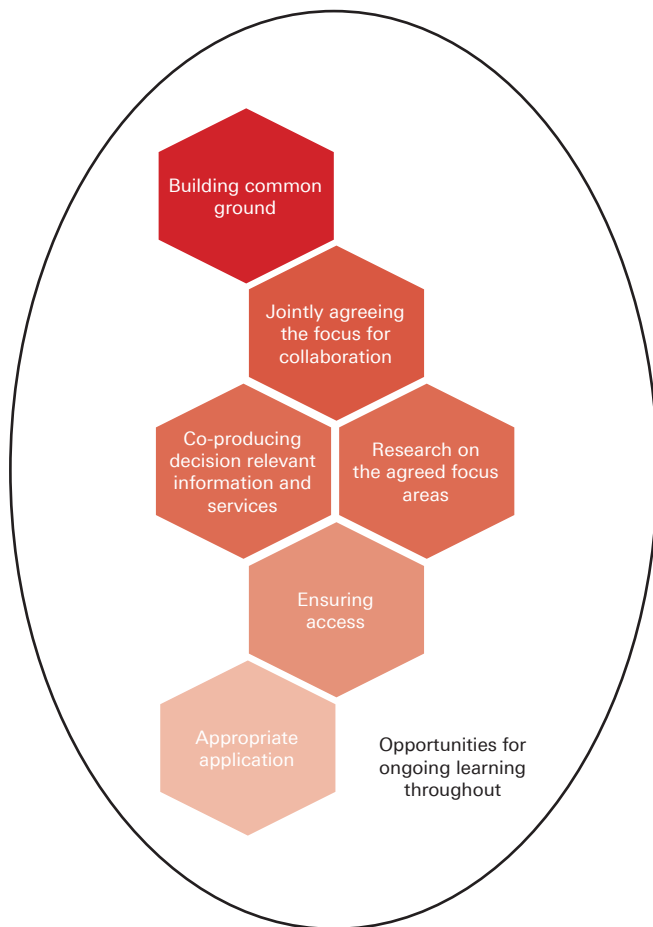


Figure 1: Steps in the process of co-production, adapted from AMMA2050<sup>4</sup>

### Box 2: BRACED – Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters

Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) is a 3-year DFID-funded multi-country programme launched in 2014. It will benefit 5 million people across Sahelian Africa and neighbouring countries as well as South and Southeast Asia, helping them become more resilient to climate extremes and improving the integration of disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation methods into development approaches. King's College London (KCL) is partner in two Christian AID led consortia, in Burkina Faso (granted £7m, will benefit 1.3 million people in four provinces) and Ethiopia (granted £4m, will benefit 700,000 people in 12 woredas - districts).

seek collaborative address to the specific societal concern.

At some stages in the process some partners are likely to need to go off by themselves and do specific activities or research to address the agreed problem.

There will also be points where partners work together to develop ways of addressing the identified research concern.

The development of co-produced outputs is not the end of the process. Other key steps include:

**Ensuring access** to the co-produced output in appropriate formats and languages through trusted and accessible channels and networks; and

**Supporting appropriate application** of the co-produced output, ensuring that partners have sufficient resources and access to the technical support required to enable effective implementation.

The process also needs to **support opportunities for ongoing learning**: employing approaches that enable continuous feedback, partners also need to commit to regular review and co-evaluation, ensuring that emerging learning informs and updates approaches and ways of working, while recognising that the problem we are seeking to address may itself change.

### Benefits and constraints of co-production

Co-production can have multiple benefits. Engaging with academics, who are considered 'more' neutral partners, strengthens the credibility of practitioners' outputs. It also enables practitioners to access academic papers and emerging scientific knowledge. While for researchers, engagement in co-production increases their understanding of localised governance systems and power dynamics, permitting review of the internal relationships of practitioners and the ways consortia partners interact.

In addition to the more general challenges facing consortia projects, such as high staff turnover across partnering institutions, in regard to co-production, participants particularly noted difficulties in governance, funding timeframes, tracking impact, institutional incentive systems and localisation of co-production capacities.

In terms of governance, co-production needs to manage different, sometimes conflicting, expectations, priorities and knowledge sources. While there is agreement that, to be effective, co-production takes time, funding available is often short-term.

The impacts of co-production can be hard to track. Recognising co-production as a process, there is a need to monitor the steps in the process. Equally

### Box 3: Opportunities and challenges for promoting learning-based action in resilience building

Participants from a range of projects confirmed that co-production has affected how resilience building initiatives are provided. Within BRACED projects, for example, co-production processes have enabled the development of more accessible and tailored climate services. Partners engaged in widely varying initiatives agreed that effective resilience building is only possible through bringing together knowledge from across different partners<sup>7</sup>. This requires all partners to mutually respect the value of the different knowledge sources that each brings to the co-production process.

As a complex, interactive process, co-production can also promote more adaptive governance amongst partnering institutions. To support resilience building, co-production requires flexibility within research and practitioners' processes and approaches. For example, where participatory vulnerability and capacity assessments are undertaken, resilience-building should seek to address concerns prioritised by people at risk rather than pre-selecting project activities according to partner organisation or donor areas of interest. Equally, resources should be retained to bring in additional areas of expertise and commission research on issues that emerge during co-production, and to re-channel or seek additional resources to address emerging or changing challenges.

Short-term funding timeframes are particularly an issue for resilience-building initiatives seeking to address underlying structural inequalities. In this regard, a significant challenge remains the question of where best to invest to build capacities for co-production processes that can continue in the longer-term. While there is considerable agreement about the types of activities and capacities required to support 'co-production', there is divergence about whether these functions are best served by strengthening the capacities of key existing institutions or by external 'boundary-type' and 'knowledge management' entities. Co-production facilitation includes the roles of convenor, facilitator, communicator, translator/intermediary and mediator<sup>8</sup>. Many of these capacities are vital to the development and provision of policies and services which can strengthen resilience-building. While strengthening the co-production capacities of the national and local institutions and networks involved in developing and using these policies and services is a lengthy and challenging process, the impacts may be considerably greater and more sustainable.

there is a need to develop a baseline and continually monitor changes at all levels of decision making, and within both policy and scientific arenas.

The incentives for co-production are not always apparent and are sometimes in conflict with other motivations. For example, within academia there remains a lack of clear career paths for researchers engaged in co-production (see Box 4). Supporting Early Career Researchers to engage in co-production initiatives may, in the long term, support significant shifts in academic incentive systems.

### Underpinning principles and ways of working that enable co-production

From emerging learning and operational experience, the following principles and ways of working are offered as having enabled co-production efforts. These proposals are organised around the initial, ongoing and closing phases of a project.



Image 2: Some principles of co-production; illustration, Fernanda de Uriarte (Crabb Consulting)

## Initial phase

**Partners jointly identify an issue where they can productively work together to address a concern prioritised by the people at risk that the initiative is seeking to support. Partners should be able to influence donors' agendas to ensure they align with interests of people at risks.** Donors should ensure initial funding is sufficiently flexible to enable address of the issue which people at risk identify as a priority concern, rather than limited to a pre-assigned sector or theme. Researchers should not prejudge the focus of research.

**Factor in sufficient time and resources to support the required steps in the process of co-production**, including building common ground to understand each other's ways of working and enable sufficient shared comprehension of the decision-making context and relevant scientific issues to enable effective collaboration. As outlined in Figure 2, co-production requires significantly more time, particularly during the framing and preparation phases.

While expecting and accepting differences and tensions, **partners reach a shared vision and common purpose.**

Partners mutually respect the value of the respective knowledge sources of all participating in the co-production process.

Jointly agree the principles and ways of working that will underpin their collaboration, ensuring that **co-production roles and responsibilities are clearly mapped out, resourced, communicated and integrated across the project process and that the people whom an initiative seeks to support have an active research role.**

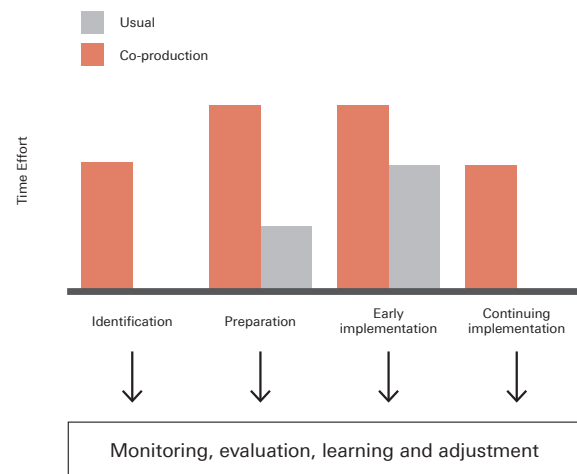


Figure 2: Time effort input for co-production compared to the 'usual' project cycle<sup>9</sup>

Explicitly recognising partners' differing agenda and incentives, **partners negotiate an impact plan that meets the impact requirements of all partners**, prioritising tangible benefits for those whom the initiative seeks to support wherever feasible.

## Ongoing through the project:

**Support continuous and culturally-relevant learning** through identifying regular spaces for informal and formal review and discussion and employing approaches that support inclusive and accountable

### Box 4: Co-production and shifting demands on academics

Co-production is becoming a priority in donor's agendas and many projects use it as a preferred method to strengthen resilience; however, there remains a lack of clear career paths for researchers engaged in co-production.

Discussions in the workshop suggested that accepting NGOs as legitimate research partners is a recent shift and has still to happen in many major UK academic institutions. Moreover, there is increasing competition between researchers and practitioners working in similar fields. Impact evaluations are usually required by donors and there is a lot of grey literature such as reports and briefings monitoring the impact of projects, mainly produced by NGOs. However, more recently, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education, is requiring more impact studies, making this a new field for academia (Christian AID, 2017). Ideally, this would involve more collaboration between academics and practitioners, jointly produced knowledge and richer outputs for both. However, there is currently a lack of incentives for early career academics to engage in processes of co-production, while publishing in highly rated journals remains the most used path to progress in academia. This has led to competition between practitioners and academics, duplication of outputs as well as lack of sharing and reciprocal learning, with negative consequences in time and resource management for both Academia and NGOs.

Lack of clear career paths for researchers can lead to lack of continuity as they are pressured to move to different positions or over to pursue a career as practitioners. However, there is a growing appreciation that valuing joint experience for researchers and practitioners alike is key. The establishment of a "co-production culture" could be the basis for more integrated, impactful and grounded knowledge, which could in turn provide new avenues for academic career progression.





## Closing phase of the project

**Share learning about those processes, approaches and ways of working that support sustainable co-production<sup>13</sup>.**

**Identifying opportunities for project learning to inform ongoing and future relevant research prioritisation.**

## Next steps

*In terms of longer-term follow up, participants identified opportunities for learning to inform the Weather and Climate Services for Africa (WISER) Programme Phase II Research and Learning strand, as well as the co-production outputs being developed within the Future Climate for Africa (FCFA) programme.*

The principles elaborated here in this learning paper, whilst not definitive, can be viewed as a starting point for conversations between partners embarking on a co-production process. The next step would involve researchers and practitioners discussing how these can be put into practice within their work, looking at challenges and ways to address them. KCL will be carrying out a session at The BRACED Annual Learning Event in February 2018, in Kathmandu, where they will be guiding researchers and practitioners through this process. Further to this, KCL will present findings and facilitate further discussion around operationalising co-production principles at the UK Alliance for Disaster Research annual conference in March 2018. The hope is that this learning paper will also encourage others from diverse projects to hold similar discussions to consider these principles and how they could be applied in their own work.

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1. Amongst others, participants represented experiences from the DFID Kenya-supported Adaptation Consortium, the Christian Aid, ESRC and Open University collaboration, and a range of projects supported by the DFID BRACED, WISER, FCFA, SHEAR and DEPP programmes, see Annex 1 for further details.
2. Amongst others, participants represented experiences from the DFID Kenya-supported Adaptation Consortium, the Christian Aid, ESRC and Open University collaboration, and a range of projects supported by the DFID BRACED, WISER, FCFA, SHEAR and DEPP programmes.
3. Building on the definition included within the KCL BRACED Learning papers 1-3 available at: <https://goo.gl/oh6mjb>
4. Visman et al (2017).
5. Kniveton et al (2016); Steynor et al (2017), p8.
6. Steynor et al (2017), p11.
7. Taylor et al (2017), p2.
8. Steynor et al (2017).
9. WISER (2017), p11.
10. Beier et al (2016), p292.
11. Kniveton et al (2015) and <http://dialoguesforresilience-blog.tumblr.com/post/86490291440/case-study-2-knowledge-timelines-exploring> and <http://dialoguesforresilience-blog.tumblr.com/post/84226761120/case-study-3-participatory-downscaling>
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