

CO-PRODUCTION AND THE KEY ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT (FRM)

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INTRODUCTION

Flood risk management (FRM) has shifted towards more decentralised and people-centred approaches. This increase in community involvement has become conceptually linked with ‘co-production,’ used in other societal domains by both academics and professionals over the past decade. The two main principles of co-production are fair, equitable distribution of power and community empowerment. Mees et al.¹ have set out typologies of citizen co-production in one of the most relevant frameworks for understanding the forms of co-production within the domain of FRM. Yet some of the Mees et al.² categories arguably do not fully adhere or embrace the core principles of equitable power distribution and empowerment.

This paper discusses how the potential limitations in these categories could inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and restrain opportunity for community empowerment. Drawing on wider research, a scoping literature review (across bibliographic databases Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar), the paper argues that five key aspects of community involvement—mutual learning, early and long-term involvement, inclusivity, clear objectives, and capacity building—would enable adherence to the core principles of co-production in FRM. These key aspects integrated with the Mees’ framework would enable the evaluation of not only the ‘form’ of co-production, but also if and how communities have been empowered in the process.

Shift in Governance – to FRM and Co-Production

Flood Risk Management (FRM) is understood as the strategies undertaken by government and non-governmental actors with the aim of averting and/or lessening the impact of flood damage³. Many researchers have reported a shift in governance from traditional ‘flood defence’, characterized by centralised top-down decision-making and structural hard engineered flood defences, to ‘flood risk management’ with the adoption of multiple, integrated and holistic measures. FRM includes hard engineering solutions, but also softer options such as nature-based solutions, property flood resilience measures, flood forecasting and warnings, which typically necessitate the involvement of multiple actors, stakeholders, and people-centred approaches⁴.

This shift can be attributed to a number of factors, that have been identified in the literature. Climate change impacts, with the increasing frequency and intensity of flood risks, means that the physical

limitations of flood defences to fully protect against flood events have been recognised⁵. There are higher costs associated with defences, more recently compounded by government austerity⁶. International and national policy drives the shift, such as the UN's Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015–2030), the EU's Floods directive (2007/60/EC)⁷, England (UK)'s 'Big Society' agenda⁸ and 'Making Space for Water' strategy⁹ and the 'Participation Society' and 'Room for the River' programme in the Netherlands¹⁰.

With this shift, communities are expected to be more involved in FRM, and some researchers have evidenced increased community participation¹¹. Communities are contributing their knowledge, ideas, time, resources, values within the entire FRM cycle (from risk prevention through to recovery from flooding)¹². This increase in community involvement has become closely linked with the term 'co-production,' which has gained popularity, arguably becoming a 'buzzword' used by both academics and professionals over the past decade¹³.

Rationale and challenges of co-production

Several researchers have also advocated for community co-production efforts in FRM. Some suggesting it has an intrinsic or inherent value¹⁴, others suggesting that co-production provides a platform to share social concerns in the decision making and implementation stages of FRM alleviation projects¹⁵. It also highlighted that it enables integration of diverse local knowledge in FRM¹⁶. Co production has also been suggested to enhance development of social capital which also enhances community resilience to flooding¹⁷.

Yet there are concerns about the time and resources required for effective collaboration efforts, which can be prohibitive¹⁸. At times, co-production is misused to legitimize already agreed decisions¹⁹. Co-production initiatives have also been reported to lead to 'environmental racism'²⁰. These challenges around collaboration and co production initiatives in FRM highlight the need for an ongoing evaluation of co-production frameworks to further facilitate reflexive practice.

Principles of co-production

Beyond its buzzword status, co-production aims to represent a shift in how collaborative efforts are approached²¹. Elinor Ostrom is widely credited as the original instigator of the term 'co-production' in the 1970s²². Ostrom's research showed that aspects of public safety can improve when communities work together with police officers instead of just being passive recipients of public safety²³. The concept gained traction through the following decades in various fields including healthcare, public administration, policy, planning and now more latterly within the FRM domain²⁴. Therefore, as co-production evolved from its conceptual origins to practical application across various fields and policies, certain core principles emerged that define its essence. These principles reflect the lessons learned from decades of implementation and research, encapsulating the fundamental values and goals that drive co-productive approaches. While the specific articulation of these principles may vary depending on the context and discipline (for example, see McEwen²⁵), two key principles or ideals consistently stand out as central to the concept of co-production.

Firstly; the goal for a fairly equitable distribution and sharing of power in decision making²⁶. This principle emphasizes the importance of distribution of power, enabling all participants to actively shape decisions. It is suggested that understanding the mechanisms through which decisions are made can shed light on how power is shared within a given context²⁷.

Secondly, the goal for community empowerment, which may involve community members gaining skills and knowledge to actively participate and or lead as well in collaborations. Fostering these interactions and processes that lead to growth and development enables community to take more ownership of their initiatives²⁸. Community empowerment could be seen as the one overarching core

principle of co-production with power sharing viewed as one of the ways to empower communities²⁹. Twigger-Ross³⁰ do define community empowerment as ‘rebalancing of power’ between actors such as government and community.

These fundamental principles of co-production, while well-established in fields such as healthcare, hold significant implications for the analysis of co-production in FRM. By applying these principles, community involvement in FRM can transition towards a community-empowerment model approach to managing flood risks.

CO-PRODUCTION IN FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT

A literature search using the keywords ‘co-production’ AND ‘flood risk management’ reveals Mees et al.³¹ paper consistently appearing among the top five results in Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar when sorted by relevance. It stands out in offering a typology or framework for understanding co-production in the field of FRM. Therefore, this paper considers Mees’ framework as one of the most relevant frameworks for understanding co-production within the domain of FRM.

Table 1 presents Mees’ framework of co-production typologies. For a comprehensive explanation of each category, please refer to the full paper.

| Typology | Categories |
|---|---|
| Type of interaction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchical • Incentivised • Deliberative |
| Role and Type of citizen input | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substitutive (Role) • Complementary (Role) • Co-funding/Co-investment (Type) • Co-delivery (Type) • Co-creation of knowledge (Type) |
| Distribution of contribution and benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private individual • Private collective • Philanthropic individual • Philanthropic collective |

Table 1: Mees’ framework for typologies of co-production in FRM

The typologies provide a useful and comprehensive framework for understanding the forms of co-production in FRM. However, it is important to evaluate how well these categories under these typologies potentially align and adhere to the core co-production principles.

Evaluating FRM Co-Production Categories for Adherence to Core Principles

Hierarchical co-production acknowledges the reality of government-mandated community involvement, but it also raises concerns about power imbalances. The current emphasis on FRM regulations and sanctions suggests a top-down approach where community members have limited agency and autonomy in decision-making, undermining the principle of fair and equitable power sharing. Additionally, the category may lack the element of voluntary participation, valuable in any collaboration initiative³². Therefore, the extent to which it truly embodies the co-production principles, as opposed to mere compliance, is debatable.

Incentivised co production, where the government incentivises citizen participation, can be viewed as a more collaborative approach than hierarchical co-production. However, it may still place the government in a more controlling position than the community by offering incentives for specific community or individual behaviours. While incentives can encourage participation and could support

community empowerment to an extent, they may not necessarily foster or allow for equitable decision-making. For example, the examples by Mees³³ primarily involve subsidies or tax breaks for implementing property flood resilience. These examples suggest that while the community was encouraged to participate, the scope of their involvement might be limited to actions predetermined by the government, leaving little room for community-led decision-making or alternative solutions. Therefore, more detail is needed, such as which decisions community contributed to and how.

Similar arguments can be made for complementary co-production whereby in some cases, complementary co-production only allows the community to supplement government activities without having the power to influence decision-making. If the community's role is limited to supporting pre-decided government actions, without having a say in how those actions are planned or delivered, then we should question if this represents true community empowerment and whether the community has shared power in the process.

For substitutive co-production, community efforts replace government actions. This raises concerns about the shifting of costs to community and exploitation of community resources as well as the erosion of public services. If communities are taking on responsibilities that were previously the responsibility of the government, it could lead to an unfair burden on them, particularly for marginalized communities with limited social, human, cultural capacities³⁴. This would undermine the empowering aspect of co-production and perpetuate existing inequalities. (Such cases have been reported ³⁵).

Private individual and collective co-production categories focus on private benefits accruing to individuals or specific groups within the community. While it can be empowering for those individuals/groups involved, an emphasis on only private gains could potentially create disparities between those who can contribute and those who cannot, leading to unequal benefits and detraction from the broader community-wide goals of FRM. If co-production efforts are primarily or solely driven by private interests, those with more resources may have more influence or better outcomes than others. This might lead to fragmented initiatives and also to neglect of marginalised vulnerable populations, hindering the goal of equitable outcomes and community-wide empowerment.

These examples highlight potential limitations in how the Mees' categories, as they stand, might inadvertently reinforce power imbalances, limit influence in decision making in the process restraining the opportunity for community empowerment. Mees et al.³⁶ have acknowledged these concerns for negative consequences. To address these concerns, this paper suggests an additional conceptual lens, supplementing the Mees' 'forms' of co-production typology to enable a more detailed analysis of 'how' the community are involved, and if they are truly empowered within FRM initiatives.

KEY ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The following section identifies key aspects to foster meaningful and collaborative community involvement from the literature, in order to promote a more balanced distribution of power and enable community empowerment.

Mutual learning, benefits and two-way communication

To foster effective and collaborative community engagement, it is important to strive towards mutual learning, respect, and benefits for both community members and state actors³⁷. Mutual learning and benefits align with the attribute of reciprocity, ensuring that both community participants and government actors gain value from their involvement³⁸. This concept of reciprocity sets the foundation for building collaborative relationships³⁹ and sharing of power⁴⁰. Collaboration is suggested to foster the development of shared knowledge and shared decision making⁴¹.

This key aspect also recognizes the importance of the diverse knowledge and perspectives of community members and encourages a two-way exchange of information between them and the project

implementers⁴². Incorporating traditional local knowledge in the engagement process is one way to express community viewpoints, suggested to lead to a more comprehensive and effective decision-making process in FRM⁴³.

It is also important for communities to feel empowered to be able to voice their perspectives and influence decision-making processes⁴⁴. This empowerment is fostered by this iterative two-way learning process and as the community also stands to benefit⁴⁵.

Early and long-term involvement of community members

Many researchers underscore the significance of sustained community engagement throughout the entire project or program lifecycle, from inception to completion⁴⁶. This enables establishment of a sense of ownership and promotes sustainability of community involvement⁴⁷. Early and consistent involvement of community members helps build effective relationships and trust⁴⁸, enabling them to contribute and also enhance the acceptability and legitimacy of engagement recommendations⁴⁹. Involving the community in decision-making from the outset ensures that the knowledge generated is locally relevant and the project is sustainable in the long-term⁵⁰. It is suggested that early and long-term involvement allows for relationship building and frequent interactions with relationship building viewed as key in the sharing power and community empowerment⁵¹.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is argued to be a key aspect of collaborative community engagement⁵². Inclusivity ensures that all members of the community are represented, have an equal opportunity to participate in the process and that this includes aspects of fairness. Inclusivity also ensures that the needs and aspirations of all members of the community are considered, particularly those who may be marginalized in society⁵³. This includes groups of individuals from different backgrounds, such as different races, social economic backgrounds, faiths, sexual orientations, and abilities⁵⁴. Different groups may require different types of engagement⁵⁵. For example, methods that require reading or writing should be avoided when working with groups in communities that may include individuals who are illiterate⁵⁶. It is important to be flexible and adjust the approach as needed to address new challenges that may arise, and the different approaches employed should equalise and share power between participants to avoid marginalizing the voices of less powerful members of the community. This leads to overall community empowerment without re-enforcing any existing inequalities within a community⁵⁷.

Clear goals, objectives, roles and responsibilities

Establishing clear objectives, roles, and responsibilities for stakeholders and participants in a community engagement process is proposed to be important to managing expectations, cultivating trust, and avoiding dissatisfaction⁵⁸. By clarifying the expectations and responsibilities of all parties involved, stakeholders are better equipped to participate effectively⁵⁹. This also ensures that the process is transparent⁶⁰. Thoradeniya and Maheshwari⁶¹ contend that transparency and accountability cultivate fairness and trust in the engagement process. Furthermore, clear communication can help to prevent misunderstandings and conflicts between stakeholders⁶². Having clear understanding of the objectives, the nature of involvement, the timeline, and the purpose of the engagement is also important for the success of community engagement⁶³, whereas unclear goals and responsibilities can lead to decreased involvement and undermine trust, leading to a failure of the engagement process. Trust building is associated with relationship building which sets the foundation for collaboration and community empowerment⁶⁴.

Capacity building

Reed⁶⁵ and Carr et al.⁶⁶ emphasize that merely providing opportunities for community involvement in decision-making and implementation is insufficient for effective participation. Therefore, community members should possess the actual capacity and skills to be involved meaningfully. This concept, referred to as competence by Carr et al.⁶⁷ can necessitate educating participants and fostering the knowledge and confidence required for their active involvement. The need for capacity building may also arise because some project implementers may undervalue or distrust experiential or indigenous local knowledge from communities⁶⁸. Puzyreva et al.⁶⁹ also corroborates this, highlighting the need of knowledge attainment through trainings and suggest that capacity building enables collaborative community involvement. Puzyreva et al.⁷⁰ contends that capacity building enables community members to develop more knowledge and skills to allow them to effectively contribute to discussions with technical experts. The importance of capacity building has been emphasized by various other researchers⁷¹. Nguyen⁷² contends that capacity building empowers communities to have more equitable power or more roles in decision making.

Although aware that these are not exhaustive, integrating these key aspects (Table 2) —mutual learning, early and sustained engagement, inclusivity, clear objectives, and capacity building— into a framework of co-production leads towards a more holistic understanding of co-production in FRM. These aspects can be used to analyse whether community involvement fosters empowerment and shared decision-making, considered as fundamental values for co-production.

| Key Aspect | Values, actions and norms involved |
|---|---|
| Mutual learning and benefits | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-way dialogue • Reciprocity • Use of local knowledge |
| Early and long-term involvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship building • Creation of community ownership • Sustainability structures |
| Inclusivity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairness • Accessibility • Emphasis on marginalised groups of society |
| Clear goals, responsibilities, objectives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear tasks • Transparency • Accountability |
| Capacity building | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainings • Sensitization efforts • Awareness raising |

Table 2: Key Aspects of community involvement

CONCLUSION

The shift in FRM towards more decentralised and people centred approaches has led to the popularity of co-production as a concept⁷³. The two main principles of co-production are fair and equitable distribution of power⁷⁴ and community empowerment⁷⁵. This paper has introduced five key aspects of community involvement that can lead towards the adherence of these core principles. Mees⁷⁶

comprehensive co-production framework is important to analyse and evaluate the form of community involvement in FRM. However, this paper argues that some categories within the framework arguably do not fully adhere to these core principles of co-production. An integrated framework, of Mees co-production typologies and this paper's key aspects, is proposed to evaluate the forms of how communities are involved in FRM, but also if and how they have been empowered in the process. This is crucial for any co-production efforts by government and other authorities.

Incorporating this extra layer of understanding community involvement in contentious contexts such as FRM is likely to introduce further complexities in practice. However, these complexities are arguably worth navigating to ensure meaningful engagement and empowerment. This approach will be tested in the next stage of this PhD research, analysing FRM government-led projects with communities in England (UK) and Uganda.

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NOTES

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