

Ready to co-create? A case study of pre-creation in care service development for older adults in the rural Swedish north

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: While co-creation has emerged as a promising approach to address complex problems in health and care systems, few examples exist where scholars have examined what separate stakeholder groups do to enhance their potential to engage in collaborative processes of joint problem-solving. The current study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by providing empirical insights into the challenges of one stakeholder enacting 'pre-creation' to reform care services for older adults in the rural Swedish north through the Storuman Cares 2050 initiative.

Methods: This case study draws upon data collected through extensive notetaking of 23 core group meetings within Storuman Cares 2050. The notes were summarized into a database, which also included reflections on how previous experiences with other projects should inform progress as well as deliberations on engagement with co-creation partners. The data was thematically analyzed with themes developed through an inductive approach.

Results: Three themes were developed. The first one, 'getting our house in order', makes explicit the values, principles, and approaches that a stakeholder might bring to a co-creation process. The second theme, 'starting close to home', describes the value of supporting and stimulating internal engagements through demonstrating a commitment and capacity for change. The third theme, 'reaching out', details the importance of, but challenges to, engaging with external stakeholders.

Conclusion: This case study bridges an important knowledge gap by detailing how one stakeholder navigated past experiences and the history of relationships with diverse stakeholders while trying to support internal engagements and other local voices when aspiring to co-create. By introducing the concept of 'pre-creation' as encompassing the enhancement of an organization's potential to engage in complex processes of joint problem-solving, the findings provide a stimulus for scholars to further explore what separate stakeholder groups do to enable them to co-create.

Keywords: Northern Sweden, co-creation, collaboration, case study, older adult care

Abstract in Español at the end of the article

INTRODUCTION

Beyond the acute shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing demographic and epidemiological transitions

towards ageing populations with chronic conditions and multifaceted needs have put increased pressures on health and care systems in high-income countries over

the last decades [1]. Adding to this, these systems are often strained by fragmentation, rising costs, workforce shortages and inequitable access. To address these complex problems and make the systems more responsive to current and emerging challenges, co-creation has been considered a useful tool by researchers and policymakers [2, 3]. This process, which moves beyond tokenism or instrumental consultations to collaborative processes of frequent, bidirectional, and transparent dialogue, is typically defined as the active involvement of all relevant and affected stakeholders from the articulation of problems to the design, implementation, and evaluation of services and solutions [4-6]. While the stakeholders can be patients, professionals, informal carers, researchers and policymakers, the value of co-creation arises through interactions which have the potential to foster ownership and innovation in the face of complexities [7].

Co-creation has been discussed as a challenging, but likely rewarding endeavor, where the roles and relationships between multiple stakeholder groups will have to be (re)negotiated through complex forms of engaged collaborations [6, 8, 9]. Relatedly, Keast and Mandell [10] argue that such efforts are far from business as usual and must be used with strategic intent. Ansell and Torfing [11], in turn, stress how successful co-creation will be contingent upon the distributed experiences, resources, knowledge and perspectives of the different groups of stakeholders who should have “the potential to engage in creative problem solving when brought together in ways that enhance the likelihood of discovering and implementing social innovations” [p. 218]. Despite this emphasis on strategic intent and potential to engage, studies to date have typically commenced at the point where co-creation takes shape through multi-stakeholder collaborations rather than examining what happens beforehand and what separate stakeholder groups do to enhance their potential to engage [12-14]. In the current study, we contribute to bridging this gap by sharing the experiences of one stakeholder – Storuman Municipality – in navigating the complexities of reforming care services for older adults in the rural Swedish north. Specifically, the objective of this study is to introduce the concept of pre-creation as a critical, unavoidable, and largely overlooked phase in the process of co-creation. The case study presented does not encompass the steps in, or nuances of, the entire process of co-creation, but seeks to bring empirical insights into the challenges of one stakeholder enacting ‘pre-creation’.

Pre-creation – the forgotten link of co-creation?

Co-creation has so far been considered as a framework (Figure 1) for creative, integrated and joint problem-solving where diverse stakeholder groups collaborate in different phases to 1) determine and define a problem to be addressed (co-ideation or initiation), 2) design contextually relevant solutions to the problem (co-design), 3) implement the solution according to agreed strategies (co-production or implementation), and 4) as-

sess the impacts of the solution (co-evaluation) [6, 14, 15]. To facilitate this, service providers such as frontline workers, managers, and policymakers should engage in distributed and decentered partnerships with each other as well as with communities (end-users and civil society) and researchers to develop new or improved solutions to complex problems [5, 6]. Not only does this make collaboration through “involvement, engagement, and participation” a prerequisite for co-creation [6, p. 650], it also brings various challenges in terms of how to co-create.

With a focus on stakeholder involvement, engagement, and participation, successful co-creation will depend on the sharing of risks, resources, and responsibilities, oftentimes in a process where the levels of, and possibilities for, involvement and influence differ between stakeholder groups. Singh et al. [8] discuss this within the health systems context, stressing how co-creation is more than bringing stakeholders together but about challenging traditional structures that govern decision making. This means that clarifying and negotiating expectations about roles in, and outcomes of, co-creation is essential to foster transparency and promote alignment of priorities [16]. However, it also implies that stakeholders should have a sense of their own obligations (and the boundaries to which they can be negotiated), before entering engaged collaborations with others. Relatedly, Vargas et al. [14] emphasize how co-creation will be contingent upon the identification of shared and conflicting values which assumes that separate stakeholders have an awareness of these values. In this regard, articulating guiding principles internally within an organization is critical to reduce the possibility of perceived exploitation in the co-creation process [2], especially among more junior or less influential partners. Since co-creation is typically a response to complex problems that have a history of being difficult to solve [17], the stakeholders involved may also be entrenched in their separate routines or traditional ways of working [18]. They may further have tried other hierarchical or collaborative problem-solving approaches that together contribute to experiences, biases and knowledge that must be acknowledged and accounted for in operationalizing co-creation. Additionally, the problem-based origins mean that co-creation is a process that rarely (if ever) occurs spontaneously. Instead, it is typically negotiated in relation to the business as usual of everyday practices [10] and between multiple stakeholders who should have some independent understanding of why and how they need to co-create [8].

Moving beyond notions of ‘blank slates’, the above backdrop means that the potential for any stakeholder to engage effectively and successfully will likely depend (at least partly) on the experiences, awareness and motivations that shape their ongoing and aspired work prior to co-creating. In other words, the ‘baggage’ (positive or negative) they bring to the process and how this ‘baggage’ may act to facilitate or constrain it. So far, the

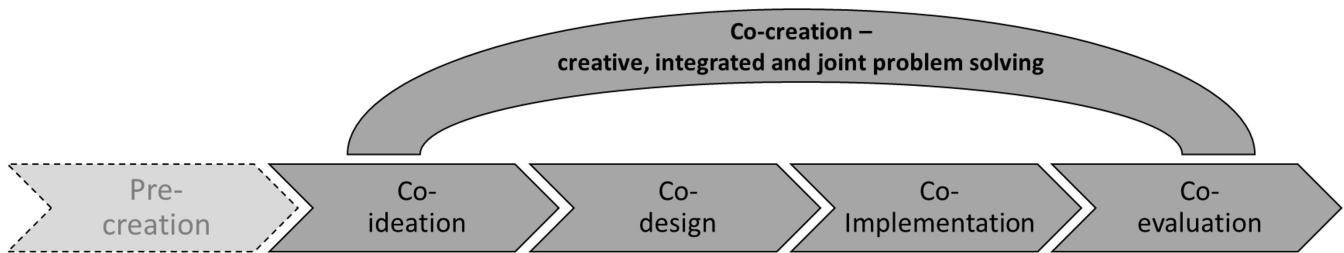


Figure 1. Outline of the co-creation framework

literature has emphasized the importance of having organizational structures and cultures to support multi-stakeholder collaborations [4, 11, 18], of planning for co-creation by framing the aim [12], and of identifying or inviting relevant stakeholders to collaborate [15, 16]. These aspects are important but mean that detailed examples and examinations of what happens before the engagements of multiple stakeholders – in the ‘pre-creation phase’ – remains largely unexplored. Taking Storuman Cares 2050 as a case, which represents a local effort to reform and improve care services for older adults in rural northern Sweden through more co-creation informed approaches, our goal is to bridge this knowledge gap.

The case and context – what is Storuman Cares 2050?

Located geographically in the inland north of Sweden, Storuman municipality is small and sparsely populated, having about 5800 residents as of 2021 and a land area of 8000 km². About one quarter of residents are older than 70 years, and 40% of these live outside the two major centers of Storuman (about 3000 residents) and Tärnaby (about 500 residents). In accordance with the decentralized Swedish governance structure, the municipality has responsibility for the provision of social services, compulsory education, and care for older adults. In the municipality of Storuman, older adult care currently comprises in-home care services (meals, activation, house cleaning etc.) and residential care in three main nursing homes (about 100 residents in total).

Since the turn of this century, the provision of older adult care in Sweden has shifted towards a more reactive (rather than proactive) approach, where care is only provided when patient needs are high. This has resulted in a tendency to move older adults to residential care instead of exploring in-home care options [19]. Effective care for older adults requires close collaboration between municipalities and provincial health departments, known locally as ‘the Region’ [20]. In the inland north of Sweden, the latter provide primary care through two ‘cottage hospitals’ and advanced care through two intermediate hospitals and one tertiary teaching hospital. The relationship between municipal and regional providers is complex and involves grey areas such as financial responsibilities, scope of services, and care planning [21]. Private service providers are also becoming increasingly active in Sweden, but their presence in ru-

ral areas of the inland north is still limited. There is, however, a large and mostly unrecognized informal care system, involving family, friends and various types of community-based groups.

By late 2020, a series of events had raised concerns within Storuman municipality about the quality of older adult care [22]. These concerns included a high death toll from the first wave of COVID-19 (especially in residential care), low rankings on national measures of care effectiveness, financial unsustainability of the current system, and growing dissatisfaction with services for older adults within the community. The municipality decided to instigate the Storuman Cares 2050 (SC2050) initiative to examine how to reform and improve local older adult care. The core team of SC2050 included the head of social services and human resources (Author 3), the municipality’s special projects manager (Author 4), and a care systems planner who also worked as an academic researcher at Umeå University (the Department of Epidemiology and Global Health) but lived in a small village outside of Storuman town (Author 2). The goal was to gather evidence about ‘best practice’ in older adult care in small rural settings and to inform municipal decisions about care services design. The initiative also aimed to provide advice on and support collaborations internally within the municipality and with other external stakeholder groups relevant to improving care services for older adults. Against this backdrop, Table 1 outlines all actors and their roles in relation to SC2050, detailing stakeholders both within, and outside of, the municipality relevant to the pre-creation process.

METHODS

This study used a codebook approach to thematic analysis where notes taken during, and revised by team members in-between, meetings of the SC2050 core team were analyzed [23]. Team members therefore played an active research role both in generating and reflecting on data. These notes were structured (coded) in a particular way, and themes were explicitly linked to the resultant database (or codebook). The themes were validated through a process of discussion and consensus between the authors. However, there was a high degree of reflexivity within the analysis, with the SC2050 core team members continuing to engage in the analysis through-

out, and the other authors sharing their own experiences in collaborative projects and their interpretations of the alignment between the data and the co-creation literature. As a result, 'notes' were not simply minutes of meetings, but living documents that captured formal and informal discussions between team members, and exchange of information between academic and practitioner participants. Team members (who are also co-authors) had collectively over 30 years of experience working in 'project' settings in the Municipality, with a

wealth of insights into how projects do and do not 'work' and the challenges and opportunities around internal and external collaboration. Notetaking, as a dynamic process, allowed us to capture these insights in formal meetings and beyond. The resultant themes presented in this paper are not presented as comprehensive and distinct summaries of the data, but as narratives about the SC2050 pre-creation process within which the data and reflection provide illustration.

Table 1. Stakeholders relevant to the pre-creation process.

Actor	Stakeholder group	Geographical location	Role
SC2050 project team	Municipality	Storuman (inland, rural)	Coordinate the pre-creation process
Storuman Municipality Board for Social Care	Municipality	Storuman (inland, rural)	Immediate oversight of the pre-creation process
Municipal Council	Municipality	Storuman (inland, rural)	High level oversight of the pre-creation process
Municipal care teams	Municipality	Storuman (inland, rural)	Active participants in the pre-creation process
Pensioners Groups	Community	Storuman (inland, rural)	Relevant to, but not active participants in, the pre-creation process
Storuman Dementia Care Support Group	Community	Storuman (inland, rural)	Relevant to, but not active participants in, the pre-creation process
Village Associations	Community	Storuman (inland, rural)	Relevant to, but not active participants in, the pre-creation process
Department of Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University	Academia	Umeå (coastal, urban)	Partially active in the pre-creation process through advice on scientific merit, contribute research, consult on how to engage the Region
Aged Care in Rural Areas Research Group	Academia	Umeå (coastal, urban)	Partially active in the pre-creation process through advice on scientific merit and contribute research.
Temporary Good and Close Care model project team	Region	Umeå (coastal, urban)	Partially active in the pre-creation process to consult on how to engage the Region
Permanent managers and decision makers	Region	Umeå (coastal, urban)	Relevant to, but not active participants in, the pre-creation process

Author 2 had the responsibility for taking longhand notes during scheduled meetings of the SC2050 core team. These notes were not formal minutes in the legal sense, but summaries of decisions and the deliberations involved in reaching decisions. The notes also summarized the core team members' reflections on discussions about SC2050 that occurred in minuted meetings of Municipal committees and Boards as well as engagements with patient and community groups. These notes were later transcribed to digital form by Author 2. There were 23 scheduled meetings held between January 2021 and May 2022 (except for July 2021, at least one meeting was held each month). The meetings were in Swedish and/or English and typically held at the main Munic-

ipal office building in Storuman town, but also other locations throughout the municipality. Each meeting was attended by all three SC2050 core team members (Authors 2-4). Some of the meetings had additional attendees, with the number of people ranging from 3-8, including frontline workers in municipal care and a regional manager leading a separate but related project aiming to improve collaboration between the regional and municipal councils in the delivery of health and social care. The SC2050 core team also produced a range of public documents [e.g., 24, 25] and project briefs available at <https://www.rural-data.com/storuman/>.

Within 1-2 days following each meeting, Author 2 sent the meeting notes to the other core team members

(Authors 3 and 4) who provided feedback at that time, or at the start of the next meeting. Meeting notes remained ‘alive’ throughout the time period, and there were occasions when notes from earlier meetings (rather than just the most recent meeting) were referenced and elucidated upon in subsequent meetings. In July 2022, Author 2 organized the meeting notes (with feedback and elucidation) into a database summarizing the date of the meeting, its duration, participants, and points of focus. Some meetings were inspired by a single focus such as preparing for a presentation to the Municipal Board while others had more detailed agenda documented prior to the meeting or were relatively unstructured with the ‘agenda’ emerging during the meeting.

The database then included a column describing each decision made by the core team, and a column summarizing how previous experiences with other collaborative projects informed each decision. Decisions were ‘flagged’ as either involving internal action to be taken by the core team and/or relating to the process of engaging with potential co-creation partners (within and external to the Municipality). The database was analyzed thematically, initially coded independently for each meeting, and then developed themes inductively based on patterns of codes across all meetings. The thematic analysis was jointly conducted by Authors 1 and 2 who then discussed the findings with the co-authors for clarifications and consensus. In presenting the findings, we have made a conscious decision not to name specific projects and community-based groups to avoid passing judgment on the past performances, an approach consistent with what is described below as the ‘philosophy’ for SC2050. However, we do provide specific feedback/comments about one stakeholder – ‘the Region’ – as we believe it plays a crucial role in any effective co-creation process resulting from SC2050.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on an analysis of Storuman municipality’s attempts to improve care services for older adults together with other stakeholder groups through SC2050, we developed three themes that capture aspects of potential relevance to the pre-creation of co-creation endeavours. Through the first ‘getting our house in order’ theme, the importance of making explicit the values, principles, and approaches that a stakeholder may bring to a co-creation process is emphasized. The second theme describes the value of ‘starting close to home’ by supporting and stimulating internal engagements through demonstrating a commitment and capacity for change. Through the third theme ‘reaching out’, the importance of, but challenges to, engaging with external stakeholders is acknowledged while some approaches to navigate them are discussed.

SC2050 is a reaction to concerns about the problems with older adult care in the rural Swedish north. It is also a response to shortcomings or failures of previous attempts to address them coupled with a growing awareness about the needs for new ways of working across

hierarchies and organizational boundaries to find appropriate solutions and areas of improvements. Based on this, each theme comprises both a narration of past experiences and a description of what SC2050 did to avoid repeating the same mistakes in aspiring to co-create within a broader network of relevant stakeholders.

Getting our house in order

Previous literature has emphasized the importance of planning and preparing for co-creation while making sure structures and cultures are supportive of, and compatible with, such complex processes [4, 11, 12, 14]. In line with, but expanding beyond, these notions, below we detail how SC2050 raised an awareness about the municipality’s values and approach to older adult care by articulating guiding principles and ensuring they were grounded both at operational and strategic levels.

Driven by a philosophy

Contrary to the co-creation idea that problems should be collaboratively determined and defined [14], there were experiences in the municipality where previous actions to improve care services for older adults had been recommended based on external stakeholders’ pre-existing or newly aroused interest in a particular technology or ‘solution’ (Meeting 13, September 2021). These ‘pilots’ or demonstration projects had often failed in implementation or to contribute substantial organizational impact and desired outcomes. To avoid making the same mistake, it was decided that SC2050 would be ‘driven by a philosophy’ that articulated the municipality’s values and approach to older adult care (Meeting 10, August 2021). A proposed philosophy was developed together with municipal care teams and the board for social care (Meeting 16, December 2021), and refined and confirmed by the Municipal Board for Social Care and ultimately the Municipal Council. In line with the co-creation literature [12], the aim was to provide a framework for change that allowed for the identification of problems and pursuit of solutions as they emerged, rather than committing the municipality to predetermined courses of action (Meeting 9, June 2021). To avoid the pitfalls of previous projects and ensure that SC2050 was responsive to local needs and had a meaningful impact on services for older adults in the community, this framework – the philosophy – had several features. Firstly, it articulated how changes to the care system would be made by:

- placing the needs of older people and those who work with or care for them at the center while maintaining a local perspective (Meeting 2, February 2021; Meeting 19, March 2022)
- taking small steps to avoid overreaching and overwhelming the municipality’s resources (Meeting 1, January 2021).
- remaining flexible to allow for new ideas to be continuously incorporated (Meeting 15, November 2021)

- evaluating regularly to align the interests of stakeholders with the needs of older people (Meeting 11, August 2021).

Secondly, the philosophy detailed how ideas and problem formulations would be filtered through an evidence-based or informed approach while specifying what types of action might be ‘in scope’ in reforming the care of older adults. This feature originated from the fact that any number of changes could be made to the care system “from Rolls Royce solutions to the bare minimum needed to make a difference” (Meeting 2, February 2021). It also built on previous experience that simply developing a wish list of ideas (even if presented in priority order) would be unlikely to lead to effective change since external funding schemes rarely match internal priorities while managers and frontline workers become overwhelmed by the cost and complexity of ‘doing everything’ (Meeting 9, June 2021). Specifically, the second feature involved developing a knowledge base for how older adult care could be managed in rural areas [see 22], including data-driven insights into care quality in the municipality and scientific recommendations. In line with Leask et al. [12, p. 7] who discuss how co-creators have the right to receive information about the current evidence to “inform their decision-making”, this knowledge base was developed to stimulate discussion about persistent challenges and potential approaches to address them (i.e., not determine courses of action). At the same time, it emphasized the need for ideas that might be pursued to be supported by scientific evidence in addition to proven experience of good practices [12, 18].

Ensuring municipal leadership

Experience suggested that previous pilot or demonstration projects typically had limited decision-making power and few resources beyond those required to sustain the team or project itself. In addition, even if project officers had good knowledge of the context in which they were working, that knowledge was rarely well distributed to policymakers throughout the municipality. Project communication within the municipality had historically generally been poor. Statements of progress were made to the municipal board and municipal committees via their monthly meetings, but these rarely explicitly provided opportunities for internal stakeholders to provide feedback or otherwise actively engage with the project before the production of a final report (Meeting 3, March 2021). This meant that project efforts quickly became distanced from daily operations, and, even if politicians remain enthusiastic about the project idea, their lack of knowledge about what was going on or being done made it difficult for them to consider resources that might be needed or available for ongoing and sustained implementation (Meeting 7, May 2021). To make sure that any strategies or solutions emerging from SC2050 would be supported and sustainable, ‘ensuring municipal leadership’ became an

explicit feature and important function of the initiative (Meeting 1, January 2021). At the general level, this involved seeking and receiving permission to make longer presentations about SC2050 to the municipal board and to the care committee on a bi-monthly basis. These presentations took the form of ‘briefs’ which were prepared in advance and released publicly after the presentations. Knowing that the progress of SC2050 was public knowledge provided incentive for the municipal leaders to consciously decide to adopt the philosophy (Meeting 5, April 2021). More specifically, ‘ensuring municipal leadership’ meant that leaders of the municipality took responsibility for external communication. This involved, for example, chairing public meetings, endorsing the documents produced, and providing funding from the central budget (rather than external project funds). Typically, temporary project officers would be ‘the face’ of a project like SC2050. However, as part of the pre-creation process, it was important that such a role was played by bureaucratic and elected leaders to make sure that the municipality held it itself (and not temporary project staff) accountable for pursuing the philosophy.

Starting close to home

To the best of our knowledge, limited attention has been paid in the literature to stakeholders’ internal dynamics in preparing for, or navigating the complexities of, co-creation. Below, we detail how SC2050 worked to secure and support engagement internally within the municipal administration to enhance their potential to co-create.

Committing internally to, and demonstrating capacity for, change

Experience suggested that previous projects were often based on externally defined problems (or solutions) and presented as overly critical of current practices within the municipality, alienating managers and frontline workers who were trying to work the best they could. Since the engagement and commitment of these internal actors would be necessary to any change in older adult care, whether co-created or not, SC2050 avoided criticism by situating the philosophy at the heart of the work. Not only was the philosophy developed together with municipal care teams and the board for social care (as detailed above), but the aim was also to make it “part of the landscape” so that staff-identified ideas, frustrations, and concerns could be more easily identified and addressed (Meeting 3, March 2021). The first step towards this was to broaden the attendance at SC2050 meetings beyond the core team and to convert these meetings from being about ‘planning’ to being about discussing and supporting ‘doings’ where managers and frontline workers were encouraged to commit (in partnership with the municipality) to an activity they thought reflected the philosophy (Meeting 14, October 2021). This meant that internal actors who wanted to participate and bring their ideas felt that they were using their time well, not just attending more meetings (Meeting 15, November 2021;

Meeting 16, December 2021). It also led to a change in culture among staff whose attitude shifted from “we don’t have time or resources to do that” to “can we manage to do that?” (Meeting 18, February 2022). As internal staff engaged with the philosophy, it began to be embedded in job descriptions (starting with the head of social services) and regular meeting agendas (Meeting 21, April 2022) reflecting an internal commitment to change in older adult care. In addition, while past projects had often been centered on new and interesting technologies, these rarely became part of daily practice, and the municipality has several cupboards full of pieces of technology procured but never used (Meeting 15, November 2021). In conjunction with committing internally to change by embedding the philosophy in daily work, SC2050 was worked to demonstrate not only an internal will, but capacity, for change. For example, new initiatives (primarily staff initiated) relating to palliative care and support for informal carers were resourced by the municipality using ‘core’ funds rather than depending on external funding applications (Meeting 23, May 2022).

Reaching out

Central to the co-creation process is identifying and engaging with other stakeholders of relevance to the issue at hand [15, 16]. However, for SC2050 and the core team, the preconditions for such endeavors when it came to external (the ‘Region’ and researchers) and other locally situated (community-based groups representing end-users or civil society) partners was challenging for several reasons. In the following, we detail these challenges while describing how SC2050 navigated them in support of co-creation.

Prioritizing local perspectives and actors

When it came to engagements with other stakeholder groups there was an emphasis in SC2050 to prioritize local perspectives and the needs of local actors as reflected in the philosophy (Meeting 2, February 2021). However, in terms of engaging with community-based groups, those known to the core team were generally skeptical about the value of SC2050 because they could see parallels between initiatives and approaches proposed and those that had been closed by the municipality in the past (Meeting 12, August 2021). Identifying and establishing contact with those not known to the team was also difficult (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic) since some groups had deliberately avoided contact with the municipality (Meeting 10, August 2021). Experience further suggested that community-based groups had become fatigued with engagement since this was often done by project officers who had little insight into and influence over local action. Against this backdrop, scholars have stressed the importance of making sure all stakeholders are able to influence in support of co-creation [11, 12, 14]. To navigate this, it was decided that engagements with community-based groups would be driven by frontline workers and led by the head of the department responsible for aged care (Meeting 10, Au-

gust 2021). The aim was to make sure that these groups felt that their voices would be heard by engaging with familiar and trusted faces from the municipality rather than project officers whom they generally had no knowledge of or connection to. Another step in supporting community engagement was to ensure that communication was done by permanent municipal leaders (elected and bureaucratic) rather than temporary project officers. This changed conversations from being about ‘them’ to being about ‘us’ (Meeting 10, August 2021). Greenhalgh et al. [18] further explicate how end users may need advocacy support to participate meaningfully in co-creation processes. In line with this, it was decided that community engagements should be allowed to emerge over time (Meeting 19, March 2022), but also that these collaborations would be prioritized over external ones to ensure that local voices would not be outweighed by dominant discourses and priorities of external stakeholders (see below). Nevertheless, there were some clear starting points for community engagement, including pensioner’s support groups across the municipality, an active dementia care support group in Storuman town, and multiple village associations across the municipality. These latter were particularly engaged in developing ideas for elder care reforms catering to the needs of people living in different locations.

Navigating external relationships

In terms of external engagements, the municipality had historically most served as a ‘junior partner’ in collaborative projects developed by the Region, hence having relatively little influence over defining the problem/s, setting the agenda, and determining the outcomes. Previous experience suggested (and Swedish law demands) that the Region has different priorities and accountabilities to the municipality, making it difficult to find common ground (Meeting 2, February 2021). The Region is also a ‘project oriented’ organization when it comes to any type of innovation. This means that while engaging locally with short-term appointed project officers is usually straightforward, it is much more difficult for the (rural) inland municipality to work beyond project structures and connect directly with (urban) permanent managers and decision makers in the Region who are located centrally in a bigger city along the coast (Meeting 15, November 2021). For example, contact between the SC2050 team and the Region was limited to the Good and Close Care model region project team, which had a limited lifespan and unclear lines of reporting to and influence within the Region more broadly. However, considering the governance structure of health and care service delivery in Sweden, which is a shared responsibility between regional and municipal councils, the Region constitutes a necessary co-creation partner for any successful change in older adult care. Based on this, the municipality had much to both gain and lose from collaborating with the Region (Meeting 1, January 2021). Due to the different priorities, accountabilities, and resources where the Region is a much ‘heavier’ player than

the municipality and community-based groups, an early decision was to delay such engagements until the house was in order, internal engagements were secured and local collaborations with the community were strengthened (Meeting 2, February 2021).

In developing the philosophy, the scientific validity of activities was important, and this focus also influenced the need to engage with researchers as external stakeholders. On the one hand, the SC2050 core team wanted to establish relationships with researchers who could contribute to the work (Meeting 10, August 2021), including recruiting students (Meeting 14, October 2021). On the other hand, there needed to be strong rules of engagement with the scientific community as experience suggested that research could validate ‘almost any action’ (Meeting 7, May 2021) and that scientific outputs often did not reflect how internal actors or other local stakeholders saw a project or its outcomes but rather seemed designed to promote the ‘successes’ of the scholars (Meeting 23, May 2022). Experience also suggested that the Region tended to monopolize knowledge within projects through its close relationship with the local University (Meeting 8, June 2021). To ensure high quality scientific participation and remove barriers to collaboration between the municipality and academia emerging from their different priorities, accountabilities and perceptions of knowledge [12], a memorandum of understanding and statements of ethical research conduct was developed with research partners (including Umeå University’s Department of Epidemiology and Global Health and two international institutions). These three research partners later formed a loose collaboration called ‘Aged Care in Rural Areas’ (ACRA) that has since expanded in membership and developed a research agenda independent of SC2050. This included a ‘right of reply’ for other SC2050 partners to respond, without censoring, to any documents released by the researchers (Meeting 17, January 2022). The core team also encouraged academic partners to publish their findings ‘in plain language’ through research briefs, providing for public feedback as well as peer review to which articles are subject.

Conclusion

While co-creation has emerged as a useful approach to managing complex problems in, and the outcomes of, health and care services [2, 8], this rising interest has not been matched with considerations of what stakeholders bring to the process and how this might shape the engagements. In the current study, we have sought to bridge this knowledge gap by sharing the experiences of one stakeholder navigating the complexities of reforming care services for older adults in the rural Swedish north. By doing this we have brought insights into the challenges of navigating past experiences and the history of relationships with diverse stakeholders while trying to support internal engagements and other local voices in aspiring to find new ways of working. We have also obtained an empirical base for introducing the concept

of ‘pre-creation’ as encompassing the enhancement of an organization’s “potential to engage” [11]. In this regard, some key learnings from SC2050 are worth reflecting on:

Firstly, while co-creation is about joint leadership and shared influence, it usually occurs in response to a history of (failed) attempts to address a persistent challenge shared among stakeholders [17]. Even with the best of intent, reconvening the same (or similar) set of stakeholders to undertake a ‘new’ form of planning appears likely to reproduce tensions and value misalignment that hindered past progress [13]. SC2050’s response to this was to clearly articulate how various actors (the Region, researchers, and community-based groups) had participated in previous attempts to address similar challenges, and devise strategies that would at least allow the municipality to re-position itself in the collaborative network. Prominent examples of this in the study are the municipality taking steps to ensure that scientific partners and the knowledge they produced were brought ‘closer to the action’, rather than sequestered within a particular predetermined structure. Specifically, through the memorandum of understanding, the scientific community was encouraged to, and held accountable for, providing active, rather than ‘just’ passive, input through already published papers. The intention was to increase shared understanding of who was ultimately responsible for what and how decisions were being made. While these ‘pre-creation’ efforts served to strengthen the municipality’s position in relation to external partners, they may also limit the potential for new forms of collaborations to emerge during the co-creation process.

Secondly, rather than heading straight into engaged collaborations with other external and locally situated stakeholders, SC2050 decided to develop a philosophy, ensure municipal leadership and organize itself internally first. In support of a pre-creation process, the aim was to make sure that there was a sense of internal ‘authorization’ for the participation in any broader co-creation process by increasing the likelihood that the municipality would act to implement co-created changes to the case system for older adults. However, since such efforts may limit the scope of changes that the municipality may be willing to consider when moving to co-create with a broader network of partners, this may hinder or complicate a more emergent co-creation process [14].

Thirdly, the efforts of SC2050 should not be seen as the (or even an) ideal way to manage pre-creation, but as an example of what that phase may comprise and look like. At the conclusion of the research (June 2022), many questions remained unanswered in terms of how co-creation might best proceed. Critical issues include bringing community-based groups (end users and civil society) back on side, finding good ways to engage with decision makers within the Region, and learning how project funding can be exploited within the context of the SC2050 philosophy. The work commenced ‘up front’ in pre-creation at least provides an approach to resolving these issues that would not have been possible had

they not been made explicit. In that way, pre-creation from the perspective of SC2050 is an example of creating the structural and cultural conditions within an organization (and, embryonically, with local stakeholders) to support the broader co-creation process [4, 11, 18].

In conclusion, the absence of some sort of pre-creation for SC2050 would almost certainly lead to repeating past mistakes of long, resource intensive and ultimately unsatisfactory collaborations where external stakeholders set the agenda or where the valued engagements of internal actors and other locally situated groups are overlooked in relation to the business as usual of everyday practices [10]. The question for Storuman municipality is therefore not so much whether to undertake pre-creation in an explicitly recognized or standardised way, but how to get ready to move beyond traditional ways of working and finding new ways of collaboratively improving care services for older adults. In this regard, the findings have moved the field forward, not by offering 'the' model for pre-creation (since there is no guarantee this process has worked for SC2050), but by detailing the experiences of one organization in navigating their entry into a co-creative process, and thus provides a stimulus for co-creation scholars to further explore the missing 'pre-creation' link.

DECLARATIONS

Publication Consent

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Competing interests

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Author contributions

FJ, DBC and AKH developed the idea for the study; FJ and DBC analyzed the data; FJ led the manuscript writing with DBC, PN, AJ, AS and AKH revising drafts critically for important intellectual content. All authors read and approved the submitted manuscript.

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¿Preparados para co-crear? Un estudio de caso sobre la pre-creación en el desarrollo de servicios asistenciales para personas mayores en el norte de Suecia

RESUMEN

Introducción: Aunque la co-creación ha surgido como un enfoque prometedor para abordar problemas complejos en los sistemas sanitarios y asistenciales, existen pocos ejemplos en los que los estudiosos hayan examinado qué hacen los grupos de partes interesadas por separado para mejorar su potencial para participar en procesos colaborativos de resolución conjunta de problemas. El presente estudio pretende colmar esta laguna de conocimiento proporcionando una visión empírica de los retos de una de las partes interesadas que promulga la "pre-creación" para reformar los servicios de atención a los adultos mayores en el norte rural de Suecia a través de la iniciativa Storuman Cares 2050.

Métodos: Este estudio de caso se basa en los datos recogidos mediante una amplia toma de notas de 23 reuniones del grupo central de Storuman Cares 2050. Las notas se resumieron en una base de datos, que también incluía reflexiones sobre cómo las experiencias previas con otros proyectos deberían informar el progreso, así como deliberaciones sobre el compromiso con los socios de co-creación. Los datos se analizaron temáticamente con temas desarrollados mediante un enfoque inductivo.

Resultados: Se desarrollaron tres temas. El primero, "poner la casa en orden", explicita los valores, principios y enfoques que una parte interesada puede aportar a un proceso de co-creación. El segundo tema, "empezar cerca de casa", describe el valor de apoyar y estimular los compromisos internos demostrando el compromiso y la capacidad de cambio. El tercer tema, "tender la mano", detalla la importancia y los retos de la participación de las partes interesadas externas.

Conclusiones: Este estudio de caso cubre una importante laguna de conocimiento al detallar cómo una parte interesada navegó por experiencias pasadas y la historia de las relaciones con diversas partes interesadas mientras trataba de apoyar los compromisos internos y otras voces locales cuando aspiraba a co-crear. Al introducir el concepto de "pre-creación", que engloba la mejora del potencial de una organización para participar en procesos complejos de resolución conjunta de problemas, las conclusiones estimulan a los estudiosos a seguir explorando qué hacen los distintos grupos de interesados para poder co-crear.

Palabras clave: Norte de Suecia, co-creación, colaboración, estudio de caso, atención a mayores

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