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Civil servants' perspectives of creativity in multi-stakeholder urban food system transformation

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents preliminary outcomes of an explorative research into perspectives of creativity among civil servants in their role as urban food system transformation facilitators, through which we aim to generate recommendations for boosting creativity in the public sector when tasked with comparable multi-stakeholder system transformations.

Methodology – We interviewed 18 civil servants of 10 municipalities that are engaged in FUSILLI, an EU project (2020-2024) aimed at fostering urban food system transformation through multi-stakeholder experimentation and policy making in Living Labs. As researchers we are part of the EU project team as well, and collaborate closely with the civil servants, for which we could have open and reflective conversations with them about creativity. Qualitative analysis of anonymized interview transcripts, supported by sensitising concepts, resulted in the identification of preliminary themes in the perspectives of creativity that were present among the civil servants.

Value – In the context of (facilitating) system transformation, perspectives of civil servants regarding creativity have been marginally studied. Our preliminary findings show that the civil servants who participated in this study considered and had experienced creativity merely as a fussy, flexible, open-ended process of generating ideas, and not so much as analytical-systematic idea consolidation. In that sense, our findings may align with earlier research into creativity in various contexts, however this congruence has specific implications for system transformation contexts wherein creativity is often longed for to guarantee the development of solutions and policies that are likely to

positively disrupt systemic barriers and patterns. To contribute to this desire, we derive recommendations for dealing with creativity in large system transformation projects, as well as for research into 1) training that builds on the creativity-related expertise of civil servants to develop ownership over creativity in the public sector, and 2) climate strengthening exercises to foster creativity in multi-stakeholder system transformation processes that balance holistic and relationship oriented approaches with the desire for pragmatism and goal-orientedness that is often present among stakeholders who want to or are engaged in system transformation.

Keywords – system transformation, perspectives of creativity, multi-stakeholder experimentation and policy development, facilitating participation, civil servants.

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

1 Introduction

Transformation of our current unsustainable food systems into more sustainable versions is urgently needed (Fao et al., 2021) and requires positively disruptive experimentation, system innovation, and innovative policies that incite and support these (Kok et al., 2019). The development of innovative policies that incite and support such transformation requires creativity in the processes leading towards these policies, such as creative stakeholder-inclusive policy development processes, but also creativity of civil servants in designing, facilitating and translating these processes into innovative transformation-facilitative policies (see in, e.g., Puerari et al., 2018). Although (previous research into) creativity-stimulating methods can scaffold such participatory policy development (see in, e.g., Baungaard et al., 2021), insights into the perspectives of civil servants regarding creativity in such processes seem marginal (Houtgraaf et al., 2021; 2022), while these are crucial for the investment in effective creativity-stimulating interventions (Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002; Rietzschel et al., 2009). Therefore, this study aimed to map perspectives regarding creativity of civil servants who coordinate the FUSILLI EU project's Living Labs for multi-stakeholder urban food system transformation, to eventually develop recommendations on how to boost creativity in comparable contexts in the future.

2 Study context, theories and concepts

To stimulate food system transformation, the FUSILLI project (2020-2024) funds civil servants of 12 cities throughout Europe to facilitate multi-stakeholder experimentation and, in parallel, development of local food system transformation-facilitative policies through a Living Lab approach. The project follows the logic of the

Multi-Level Perspective model (Geels, 2002) as well as other transition theories (e.g. Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010) in its ideas to incite transformation throughout the whole food chain on micro, meso and macro level. Through extensive collaboration with local and remote universities throughout Europe, the civil servants, who coordinate the Living Labs, receive written and in-person (online and offline) handouts for preparation, action planning, execution, out-scaling and policy development phases of the Living Lab approach. Continuous learning and reflection is facilitated to scaffold the civil servants' transformation efforts, in the form of the Dynamic Learning Agenda method (cf. van Mierlo et al., 2010), as well as through incidental training sessions.

Based on learning questions that the FUSILLI civil servants had regarding "*how to effectively engage stakeholders in our Living Labs?*" and the project task 'organising multi-stakeholder visioning workshops', to be done in the second project phase after stakeholder mobilization, the authors of this paper thought it would be wise and interesting to do action research into creativity in this FUSILLI project context. In response to the civil servants' learning question, we gave a short training on "*how to facilitate visioning wherein different perspectives are included in a creative way*". During that training, examples were provided of creativity-stimulating exercises, with diverging, clustering, selecting and converging steps (cf. Tassoul & Buijs, 2007). After that training, the civil servants had the freedom to develop multi-stakeholder visioning sessions in their own way. This study took place in the period after that training, before the actual multi-stakeholder visioning workshops were officially due.

The food system transformation ambition of FUSILLI and the Living Labs, under the coordination of civil servants, seemed an interesting new context for us as researchers to expand the existing body of literature that investigates creativity. In the public sector creativity is known to be harder to realise than in corporate context, for example due to the absence of capital investors or strict performance indicators (Houtgraaf, 2022). However, in transformation projects with funding of the European Commission, there are very clear action-oriented objectives and performance assessments based thereon, such as deliverables, mid- and end-term reports, formative and summative evaluations, and reviews. In that sense, an EU project context may conceptually position civil servants, creativity-wise, between the public and private sector. Furthermore, much scholarly literature on creativity, also in public sector context, focuses on creativity of individuals or in organisations and teamwork, but research on creativity in a multi-stakeholder setting

aimed at transformation, seems to remain underexplored. An EU-funded multi-stakeholder transformation project with a large role for civil servants in it, therefore, serves as an interesting new case context to do research into creativity.

With creativity we are referring here to the combination of (amongst others):

- Multidimensional, multifaceted, multistage processes evolving over time (Rietzschel et al., 2009) for “*the production of ideas, insights, or products that are both novel and appropriate*” (Baas et al., 2013, p. 732). Although the quantity of generated ideas does not guarantee the quality of eventually selected ideas, innovative outcomes are to be expected from these ‘production processes’, both in terms of number as well as in terms of quality (Rietzschel et al., 2009).
- Idea generation and idea consolidation, respectively the creation of many alternative (partial) outcomes, and then clustering, prioritising, combining these, and finalising into a final outcome (see in, e.g., Tassoul & Buijs, 2007).
- Collaboration, with which we refer to interactions in which people work individually alongside each other as well as together in the process. Research reveals that “*while independent individuals may be more creative, groups may be more innovative*” (Nijstad & De Dreu, 2002, p. 400). Therefore, the production processes may alternate between individual and group work.

When transposing these characteristics of creativity to the context of multi-stakeholder urban food system transformation experimentation and policy development, wherein a civil servant is the facilitator, creativity refers here to a process through which diverse actors, e.g. from the quintuple helix (cf. Carayannis et al., 2012), collaboratively produce innovative ideas, practices, and, ultimately, policies that enable transformation of their local food system. We assume that the interactions are autonomously steered, (professionally) facilitated, or anything in between, and that civil servants can be participants as well as facilitators of the processes. By including this facilitation dimension in our take on creativity, we move a bit beyond the take of Houtgraaf et al. (2021) on creativity as “*public servants coming up with novel and useful ideas through various practices*” (p. 3).

Previous research pointed out that the presence or occurrence of creativity depends on numerous conditions, such as individual characteristics of a person (Baas et al., 2013), a facilitator and its creative capacities (Burstein, 2015), available resources such as money, time, tools, the physical environment, and the social context (Baas et al., 2015). In the

context of civil servants that facilitate urban food system transformation, creativity thus requires creativity-facilitating characteristics of the civil servant, resources in the municipality context, as well as a creativity-welcoming social environment, both within the municipality as well as among local stakeholders engaged in food system transformation.

To unravel how these conditions can be shaped as such to increase likelihood of creativity to emerge, we investigated the FUSILLI civil servants' perspectives regarding creativity in their transformation setting. With perspectives we refer here to knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values and interests, or a combination thereof, which determine how people make sense and express their viewpoint regarding a specific topic or thing, in a specific context and moment in time (see in, e.g., Betten et al., 2018; van der Meij et al., 2018; Horn et al., 2022). When engaging in a new or complex situation, perspectives determine what people consider as problematic, as well as how they define the ideal solutions to identified problems. When perspectives regarding a topic highly differ, it is likely that controversies or disputes arise that are hard to manage (Schön and Rein, 1994). Studying perspectives of creativity among civil servants may therefore support the search for pathways to further boost creativity within the public sector.

3 *Methodology*

This study took an exploratory approach to build on and respond to various gaps in scientific literature on creativity as reported by Houtgraaf et al. (2021). In their extensive literature review, Houtgraaf et al. (2021) argue that “*there is a paucity of research on the public sector creativity*”, especially explorative qualitative studies, and they plead for “*research with individual public servants as unit of analysis*” which “*allows for complete and unbiased knowledge on the creative practices public servants apply*” (p. 13).

We, alias the authors of the conference paper that you are reading here, are action researchers involved in the FUSILLI project who, amongst others, facilitate learning and reflection among the civil servants of the FUSILLI Living Labs in 12 cities throughout Europe. Due to this close involvement, we could conduct ten explorative, semi-structured interviews with 18 civil servants of 10 different FUSILLI Living Labs to explore their individual perspectives of creativity. We focused in each interview on the Living Lab process of the civil servants and in particular the multi-stakeholder visioning task that was

due at the time of the interviews, and then had conversations about creativity in the context of their visioning task and in the context of their Living Lab as a whole.

Our preliminary qualitative analysis of anonymized interview transcripts resulted in the identification of several themes in the civil servants' perspectives so far. The interviews were transcribed, anonymized, summarised and checked by the civil servants for correct interpretation. We performed a qualitative analysis of the transcripts supported by sensitising concepts (cf. Bowen, 2006) in line with our definition of perspectives as described above: civil servants' knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values, interests, perceived problems and solutions regarding creativity, and combinations thereof. In our preliminary findings below, the identified themes are summarised.

4 Preliminary findings

Many civil servants who participated in this study reported to have a (low) degree of comfort or familiarity with creativity personally. Some of them spoke about earlier teaching or research work in which they had to apply or facilitate creativity, most civil servants referred to earlier experiences with creativity as participants of workshops. One of them had little ideas on the meaning of creativity. When analysing their responses more deeply, the civil servant's experiences and associations with creativity merely appeared to refer to exercises, training sessions or workshops, wherein tools such as post-its and persona's were used to stimulate the collaborative generating of diverse ideas among participants. Processes wherein idea consolidation was central were not mentioned.

Furthermore, most civil servants noted that both colleagues as well as external stakeholders - who they need to engage in their Living Lab - often express hesitance to apply or engage in multi-stakeholder meetings in which creativity is central. When prompted further for reasons behind this hesitance to creativity within municipalities and among stakeholders, civil servants expressed that a factor in this hesitance is the commonly perceived amount of time that creativity is expected to consume in relation to the experienced relevance of its outcomes. Many civil servants could recall meetings or sessions that were extremely nice, creativity-wise, but seemed to yield little tangible results, let alone transformative impacts.

The civil servants described several processes through which they thought hesitance to creativity can grow or, reversely, reduce. Rapid changes in the municipality (e.g. due to elections) and dominant 'gatekeepers' (e.g. alderman) could enlarge a hesitance to

creativity, or, instead, take it away. Several civil servants noted that if important key actors actively promoted innovation, the openness for creativity seemed to grow. Civil servants also perceived that personal creativity (facilitation) skills and the presence of professionally skilled creativity facilitators could function as fruitful for creativity in their multi-stakeholder processes. Additionally, several cultural factors, such as the commonality of bottom-up processes in a region or country, could result in a more favourable climate for creativity.

5 Discussion

In a recent study into creativity among civil servants, Houtgraaf et al. identified that amongst others ‘work demands’ could hinder creativity, and, although to a lesser extent, the perceived merits of newly generated ideas (2022). Our preliminary findings regarding the perspectives of creativity among civil servants ventilate a similar pressure and dissatisfaction around creativity in a multi-stakeholder food system transformation context. It might be alarming that in transition contexts civil servants report similar doubts about (the effectiveness of) creativity, especially since in such contexts creativity is often called for to generate innovative solutions and policies that can break through persistent barriers and patterns (European Commission, 2020).

Although creativity as a concept may be too complex to provide a “*single set of conditions*” for it (Rietzschel et al., 2009, p. 21), we derive several practical recommendations from our preliminary findings, namely with regard to (further research into) boosting creativity for idea generation as well as idea consolidation in the public sector when tasked with multi-stakeholder transformation.

Our findings confirm a need to break open the persistently omnipresent idea that creativity is a messy process, centred around idea generation, as problematized earlier by, e.g., Rietzschel et al. (2009), to raise awareness of the idea that creativity is also about what comes after that ideation stage, namely idea consolidation. Many people believe that creative outcomes arise as a result of flexible, unstructured processes and not so much via highly structured and focussed processes through which, in reality, many innovations emerge as well (Baas et al., 2015). In the perspectives of creativity that the FUSILLI civil servants reported to us, we see a similar underrepresentation of the latter belief, namely the so-called persistence pathway of creativity (ibid). This strengthens a need for (action research into) tailor-made creativity-stimulating methods that pay special attention to

clustering, prioritising, and converging stages of ideation, as well as to highly structured and focused techniques for multi-stakeholder inclusive experimentation and policy development aimed at system transformation. Such tools would help to stretch persistent ideas around creativity that inhibit the actual fruitful emergence of it in multi-stakeholder transformation settings wherein one could argue that it is so highly needed.

Furthermore, we recommend (action research into) mini-interventions aimed at quickly increasing 'climate strength', being the degree to which people perceive the same climate, which is known to foster truly fruitful idea generation (Rietzschel et al., 2009). In a relatively new multi-stakeholder transformation setting, it is unlikely that actors automatically experience climate strength due to their novice relationships and implicit fundamentally different interests or power imbalances (Kok et al. 2019). Therefore, as researchers, we think it is rather logical that the FUSILLI civil servants reported that they themselves, their colleagues, and other - to be engaged - stakeholders had negative experiences with and beliefs about (the merit of) creativity. If we look at inspiring holistic approaches to transformation, such as Theory U (Scharmer, 2009), or theology-inspired transformation rituals and symbols (cf. Hasselaar, 2020), but also more pragmatic and instrumental ideas on transformation (e.g. Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010), extensive time is to be spent on generative listening, relationship building, joint problem analysis, futuring and action planning. However, in reality, there seems to be too little time for such processes amidst everybody's professional and private duties, while one could argue they are so much needed to increase climate strength and thus for creativity to flourish. While we underline the importance of climate building for creativity to flourish, short exercises that balance climate strengthening and pragmatic goal-orientedness might be needed to overcome this difference between what various transformation approaches prescribe and what is possible in practice.

Last but not least, we should reflect on our role as action researchers in this project as well. The FUSILLI Grant Agreement promises that the project will generate innovative actions as well as food system transformation-facilitative policies through a Living Lab approach. Inherently connected to that promise is the expectation that civil servants who coordinate these Living Labs, of which many participated in this study, will (be equipped to) apply all sorts of methods and techniques to engage stakeholders. Amongst others, it was us and other project partners, who wrote these promises down in the project proposal. Now that we have performed this research, we realise that we should more explicitly

converse about one another's perspectives of creativity in these kinds of project contexts. Same goes for numerous other EU projects aimed at system transformation. If innovation is promised in the Description of the Action (DoA), what should it mean in practice? Although scholars also address downsides and negative consequences of creativity (Gino and Ariely, 2012; Khessina et al., 2018), we believe that explicit conversations about creativity can help to better map different perspectives of creativity, creativity-related competences present in the network, and thereby the development of tailor-made trainings and tools for creativity that build on these in-house creativity-related competences, to ultimately develop ownership among civil servants to (keep) experiment(ing) with various approaches to creativity to develop innovative practices and policies for system transformation contexts.

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