

Exploring antecedent factors of co-creation in public service ecosystems: a study of local welfare platforms in Italy

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Abstract: This paper examines the potential of platforms for co-creating public services as a solution to contemporary societal challenges in welfare, using a service ecosystem perspective. The study provides a multilevel examination of antecedents to co-creation through a comparative multiple-case study of four cases of platforms developed in Northern Italy at the local level involving public authorities, private service providers, and citizens. The study finds that platforms for co-creating public services are developed not only top-down, but also middle-out and bottom-up, recognizing stakeholders' autonomy and proactive initiatives in co-creation. The study also recognizes the importance of political support and proactive citizens, social workers, and public officials in the development of platforms for co-creating public services.

Keywords: platform, co-creation, public service ecosystem, public services, welfare, antecedents

Introduction

Government budgetary pressures and constraints, citizens' rising expectations and diversified needs are increasingly affecting our contemporary society, with complex societal problems that cannot be solved by the government alone using existing solutions. Welfare, in particular, faces monumental challenges such as immigration, aging population, income inequality, unemployment, and housing affordability.

In response to these challenges, platforms have emerged as a potential solution and are increasingly being viewed by academics, policymakers, and practitioners in public administration as transformative tools for public service delivery, leveraging the contributions of external stakeholders in context of limited resources (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Torfing et al., 2019). Platforms can facilitate co-creation of value at the intersection of the public, private, third sectors, and citizenry, moving away from the transactional and linear paradigm typical of the New Public Management (NPM). Although the participation of citizens and other societal actors in co-creation is not new, platforms offer the potential for unprecedented levels of co-creation, especially with the support of digital technology and online connectivity (Linders, 2012).

While platforms have been studied predominantly in business administration research and information science (for a discussion of extant streams of literature on platforms in the private sector, see McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017), they have recently attracted scholarly interest in public administration and management (PAM) as tools for distributed governance, collaborative innovation, and co-creation of public services (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Meijer & Boon, 2021). However, the debate on platforms in PAM has lacked empirical evidence and has neglected the essential role of antecedent conditions in co-creation, including which actor

initiates the creation of platforms and how they emerge (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Casalini, 2023).

The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of the factors that facilitate and hinder value co-creation in public service ecosystems enabled by platforms. This study aims to build a public service ecosystem perspective on co-creation by examining antecedents, including political and societal factors, organizational circumstances, and individual conditions. To achieve these research aims, the following research questions were developed:

1. What are the key antecedents explaining the development of co-creation platforms, and what are the prevailing value objectives?
2. What drivers facilitate, and which barriers hinder the creation of co-creation platforms for public service delivery?

To answer these research questions, a comparative multiple-case study design was employed, analyzing four cases of platforms developed in Northern Italy at the local level, involving public authorities, private service providers, and citizens in the delivery of welfare services to local communities.

The paper makes two main contributions to the PAM literature. First, in adopting a service ecosystem perspective, the study provides a multilevel examination of antecedents. In particular, platforms for co-creating public services are found to be developed not only top-down, but also middle-out and bottom-up, recognizing that co-creation is not solely initiated by the government, but also considering stakeholders' autonomy and proactive initiatives in co-creation. Second, the study sheds light on the enablers and barriers to co-creation across the service ecosystem, recognizing not only the role of organizational arrangements but also political support and proactive citizens, social workers, and public officials in the development of platforms for co-creating public services.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section summarizes the research literature on platforms for co-creating public services and their antecedents. The following section describes the research methods used, presents the results of the comparative case analysis, and outlines the main contributions of the study. The final section discusses the limitations and avenues for future research.

Co-creating welfare services on platforms: an overview of prior research

Defining co-creation and platforms in public services

Co-creation is increasingly recognized as an innovative approach for public organizations to provide high-quality services and respond to the diverse needs of society, despite limited public resources (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Torfing et al., 2019; Voorberg et al., 2017). In contrast to more transactional and linear approaches associated with New Public Management, co-creation recognizes that value is created by the interaction of a broader range of societal actors beyond public service users and providers, including citizenry, businesses, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders (Best et al., 2019; Bryson et al., 2017). In particular, co-creation focuses on creating new, innovative service systems and solutions that create more public value rather than merely improve existing services (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a; Jukić et al., 2019).

Although co-creation has broad relevance to public governance, existing literature underscores the challenges of implementing co-creation processes, which do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they require coordinated efforts and institutional settings that allow distributed actors who may be geographically and socio-culturally distant from each other to come together, exchange knowledge, resources and ideas and engage in collaborative actions (Torfing et al., 2021). In this context, platforms have recently been regarded as frameworks that can facilitate multi-actor collaboration and enable distributed innovation, collaborative governance, and the co-

creation of public services in complex ecosystems (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Meijer & Boon, 2021).

Platforms, as defined by de Reuver et al. (2018), are specific interfaces that bring together multiple user groups and foster interactions and collaboration. While PAM research has mostly viewed platforms as a strategy within e-government (Cordella & Paletti, 2019; Janssen & Estevez, 2013; Klievink et al., 2016), some governance scholars have started to consider platforms as an organizational logic that brings new elements to the field of public governance (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Haveri & Anttiroiko, 2021). The platform model incorporates features of hierarchies, networks, and markets to enable the interaction and integration of resources from various actors (Haveri & Anttiroiko, 2021). It places emphasis on transparency of information, user orientation, and the platform's role in facilitating and to some degree regulating many-to-many collaborative relationships to achieve desired outcomes (Ansell & Gash, 2018). Although information technology can offer larger network effects and lower-cost transactions, thus increasing the scale of collaboration, governance scholars recognize that platforms are not limited to digital platforms but can also include physical platforms (Torfing et al., 2021).

In the context of public services, platforms serve as intermediaries between dispersed users and service providers, by aggregating demand, enhancing matching with supply, and mobilizing untapped resources (Ansell & Gash, 2018; Ranerup et al., 2016). Additionally, they facilitate the development of innovative solutions by bringing together a larger pool of developers and service providers through open data and resources (Mergel, 2018; Mergel & Desouza, 2013). This shift towards a platform model marks a significant change in the government's role in public services, where instead of solely providing or favoring services under contract with the state, the government becomes a service orchestrator whose primary task is to facilitate and

direct the activities of citizens, businesses, and the third sector (Janssen & Estevez, 2013; Millard, 2018).

Welfare services have been regarded as a particularly promising area for the application of the platform model (Arcidiacono et al., 2022; Huws, 2020). These services are characterized by their complexity, multi-layered structure, and the need for coordination and collaboration among various actors to exchange resources and deliver high-quality assistance (Voorberg et al., 2015, 2017). The platform model offers an opportunity to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of welfare by connecting service providers with local communities, thereby enabling governments to respond to needs that go beyond the limited scope of social policies and empower individuals and communities to take a more direct control over their own well-being (van Dijck et al., 2018).

A service ecosystem approach to analyzing co-creation platforms and antecedents

The academic interest in platforms for co-creating public services has mainly centered around their conceptual properties and opportunities for co-creation, leading to a primarily theoretical discussion (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Meijer & Boon, 2021). This debate lacks empirical evidence and neglects the essential role of antecedent conditions in co-creation, such as the overall political culture, public governance regime, cross-boundary collaboration experience, organizational capacities, and specific service characteristics (Casalini, 2023). Although there is a growing recognition of the significance of contextual factors that influence the co-creation process and the effectiveness of resulting solutions, it remains unclear which actor initiates the creation of platforms for co-creating public services and how they emerge (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b).

Initial contributions have identified some organizational barriers that public sector organizations face in implementing co-creation platforms, including a shortage of trained

personnel, reluctance to spend time managing and moderating activities with multiple actors, traditional inward-looking organizational structures, fear of ceding control, and outdated cultures that undervalue citizen and third-party input (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Kleinhans et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2021). These findings align with the general organizational barriers that hinder co-creation processes (Baptista et al., 2020; Sicilia et al., 2019; Torfing et al., 2019).

However, platforms, as frameworks for co-creation within complex ecosystems, require a more holistic view that encompasses the role of political and societal antecedents, as well as that of individuals and communities, rather than solely focusing on the role of public service organizations. The service ecosystem perspective, which has gained momentum in PAM, shifts towards a relational model that recognizes the interplay between multi-actor configurations and institutional arrangements in delivering and shaping value in public services (Osborne et al., 2021, 2022; Petrescu, 2019; Trischler & Trischler, 2022). Adopting this perspective in analyzing platforms for co-creating public services highlights three levels: societal, organizational, and individual, or *macro*, *meso*, and *micro* (Osborne et al., 2022). This approach allows for examining the political and societal factors that influence the emergence of co-creation platforms, as well as the organizational and individual capacities that enable or hinder their implementation. Analyzing the antecedents of local welfare platforms from these three levels provides valuable insights into the factors that shape the emergence of co-creation platforms, which could inform the development of more effective co-creation practices in the future (Jukić et al., 2022).

Research method

Our study applied a comparative multiple-case study design, which is well-suited for exploring new phenomena like local welfare platforms for co-creating services and emphasizing the unique setting in which they are created. This design allows for an exploration of key variables

and their relationships in situations where previous research is insufficient for formulating clear hypotheses (Eisenhardt, 1989, 2021) and is widely employed in PAM research (Jensen & Rodgers, 2001; Stewart, 2012).

We focused on cases of local platforms that aim to co-create welfare services. To define welfare services, we relied on the European Commission's definition of Personal Social Services of General Interest¹, which includes a range of services directly provided to individuals, such as social assistance, employment and training, healthcare, childcare, social housing and support, long-term care for elderly and disabled individuals, sport, and recreational services. Platforms were limited to specific interfaces and service structures, both digital and physical, which facilitate and enable the collaboration of multiple actors, including local government, public and private service providers, and citizens.

We restricted our analysis to Italy, which is an ideal location to study local welfare platforms for several reasons. First, Italy boasts a robust welfare system and ranks among the highest in terms of welfare expenditure among developed countries². Secondly, the territorialization of welfare policies in Italy has led to increased complexity and layers of government involved in welfare, while strengthening the relationship between citizens and local welfare actors (Andreotti & Mingione, 2016; Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008). Additionally, Italy faces significant demographic challenges, including an aging population, low birth rates, and increasing immigration, which pose a threat to the sustainability of its welfare system and necessitate new forms of public and private collaboration.

¹ The definition of services of general interest can be found here: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/single-market/services-general-interest_en

² In 2019, welfare accounted for 28.2% of the country's GDP, compared to the OECD average of 20%; Source: OECD, Social Expenditure Database <https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2020-Social-Expenditure-SOCX-Update.pdf>

Our research methodology comprised three stages: case selection, data collection, and analysis. To facilitate comparison across cases, we employed a replication logic throughout all three phases (Yin, 2017). In addition, we employed two forms of triangulation: data and investigator triangulation (Patton, 1999). This entailed collecting data from multiple sources and involving the three researchers throughout the whole research process. This approach provided a multifaceted interpretation of results and enhanced the validity and reliability of our findings. Further details on our research methodology are discussed below.

Case selection

The relatively small number of local welfare platforms available made the selection of cases a challenging endeavor (Gerring, 2017). We conducted a preliminary search on Google and consulted with key individuals and institutions³ to identify a total of 29 welfare platforms providing services to local citizens (the full list of platforms identified can be found in Appendix A in the supplementary materials). Given the exploratory nature of our research, we employed purposive case selection, and utilized a set of “influential” and “diverse” case selection criteria (Gerring, 2017; Seawright & Gerring, 2008), to facilitate comparison across cases and highlight differences and similarities. Multiple-case studies inherently involve comparative analysis and examining variations in cases is a valuable research tool in this approach (Stewart, 2012).

Table 1 summarizes our final sample of cases, which are at different stages of maturity and represent a diverse range of local territorial areas in terms of population size. These cases also reflect a broad spectrum of welfare platforms, encompassing varying media channels, numbers

³ For example, we leveraged the mapping of welfare platforms realized by Università Cattolica as part of the project WePlat; additionally, in 2020, two of the authors participated in the project Welfare Innovation Local Lab, which involved ten Italian municipalities and four regions and aimed to identify innovative collaborative solutions in local welfare.

and types of welfare services offered, and involving multiple actors and platform leaders. It should be noted that three out of the four cases are located in Lombardy, which is the largest region in Italy with the highest GDP per capita. The fourth case is from the nearby Region Trentino Alto-Adige, which shares similar demographic and economic conditions as Lombardy. This allowed us to have a consistent socioeconomic context for our analysis within the Italian system, which provides more relevance to the political, social, organizational, and individual antecedents that explain the development of the cases.

***** Insert Table 1 here *****

Data collection

We gathered case study evidence from both primary and secondary sources (refer to Appendix B in the supplementary materials for more information on the sources used). For each case, we collected policy documents, project documents, reports, and websites, as well as articles on newspapers and specialized magazines. Additionally, between July 2022 and February 2023, we conducted seven in-depth interviews with “knowledgeable agents” (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 17), including public officials, representatives of platform providers, service providers and local cooperatives. These interviews, conducted both via video call and in person and lasting approximately one hour each, utilized a structured questionnaire with open-ended questions to elicit exploratory insights (the full questionnaire is available in Appendix C in the supplementary material). Furthermore, we utilized first-hand knowledge obtained by two of the authors who participated as observants in meetings during the development of two out of four welfare platforms.

Data analysis

Case study data were interpreted using thematic analysis based on the method developed by Gioia et al. (2013). Recurring topics were identified and grouped into categories (i.e., “first-

order” concepts), which were then refined by collapsing similar topics into broader themes (i.e., “second-order” concepts). The themes were then compared and mapped back to different levels of Osborne et al.’s (2022) public service ecosystem. This approach was not purely inductive or deductive, but rather an iterative process of constant comparison between the empirical material and the extant literature (Eisenhardt, 1989).

To perform this analysis, two authors met regularly, either in person or online. They independently analyzed and coded the data and then shared their findings and had detailed discussions to address any discrepancies. The third author oversaw the process, reviewed the draft analysis prepared by the first two authors, and discussed the key implications with them.

Case studies of local welfare platforms

In this section, we present a description of the different welfare platforms analyzed, paying special attention to the specific settings in which they were developed. Table 2 offers a comparative summary of our four case studies.

***** Insert Table 2 here *****

WeMi

WeMi is a platform that operates in the city of Milano, which is the second largest city in Italy as of 2022, with a population of 1.39 million residing in the heart of a metropolitan area of 3.24 million. The city faces a range of challenges common to modern European cities, including urbanization, environmental change, gentrification, homelessness, immigration, and cultural integration. Nearly half of all households consist of only one member, leading to a high risk of social isolation and loneliness, particularly among the elderly, while poverty and social inequality are increasingly affecting larger segments of the population.

WeMi, developed and managed by the Municipality of Milano, was launched in 2015 with its roots traced back to 2012-2013, when the newly elected social democratic mayor and council

introduced a Strategic Welfare Plan emphasizing inclusivity and innovation in the welfare sector, after two decades of conservative governance. In the following year, Fondazione Cariplo, a major grant-making foundation supporting local communities in the Lombardy region, issued a call for projects to fund new initiatives intended to innovate the provision of welfare services, which acted as a catalyst for the creation of *WeMi*.

As one of the first attempt to apply a platform model to welfare, the development process of *WeMi* started with clear political objectives and was highly participatory, with multiple public and private stakeholders, including local academic institutions, supporting the Municipality in the design of this new solution. *WeMi* was conceived as a local “phygital” platform, aiming to aggregate public and private welfare services. Its ambitious goal was to address the needs beyond the traditional boundaries of social policies, better tailor services based on the heterogeneous preferences of the population, and recompose the fragmented array of available services in the territory, while also including more citizens through both its digital interface and physical locations in different areas of the city.

Initially piloted in one area of the city, the platform started with only a selected group of not-for-profit service providers, focusing on home care and assistance services. Over time, the platform expanded on a larger scale, with service providers including for-profit organizations regulated by an accreditation mechanism. The platform’s scope of services provided also evolved, and it currently encompasses almost 500 different types of service including health, leisure, education, elderly and family care, housing, language training, and financial inclusion services for foreigners. The number of physical access points has increased from two to twenty.

From an organizational perspective, *WeMi* was incorporated into a separate structure that was ad hoc created by the Municipality. The platform had dedicated financial and human resources, providing great flexibility in its development, particularly during its early stages. However, this decision also led to the perception that the initiative was outside the purview of the

Municipality. As a result, *WeMi* was never promoted using the Municipality of Milan's brand and logo, and during its scale-up phase, it did not always receive the necessary political and organizational support.

Tradate Welfare

The platform *Tradate Welfare* is active in eight neighboring small municipalities in the province of Varese, with a combined population of 55,305 inhabitants as of 2022, which have increased significantly over the past decades, due to outflows from bigger cities such as Milano and Varese. The area has a solid welfare system, with a high public expenditure per capita, particularly for children, families, and people with disabilities, and established private and not-for-profit service providers.

The district, responsible for the eight municipalities, set an ambitious goal in their 2015-2018 Area Social Plan to rethink welfare services and engage with local private and not-for-profit service providers to make welfare more personalized and responsive to the diverse needs of citizens. The goal was to interact with all citizens and families, besides their income and social status, and not only with public assistance program consumers. In 2018, after months of discussions and co-design involving the district, 14 local service providers, and the CGM Group, a national consortium of 800 cooperatives and social enterprises that had developed digital welfare tools, the *Tradate Welfare* platform was released as the most suitable solution to implement this new open and innovative approach to welfare.

The *Tradate Welfare* platform offers a wide range of welfare services to all citizens living in the area, including health, leisure, education, elderly care, family, home, and pet care. Citizens can access both publicly subsidized services and those that can be purchased out of pocket. The platform is accessible online, as well as through call centers and four physical social points, and enables citizens to select services and providers, compare prices, make purchases, and pay

with their credit card. Service providers must be accredited by the district and pay a monthly subscription to access the platform, which follows quality standards defined by the district. The district recognizes that the reputation of the platform depends on the quality of services offered, and as such, they have designed stringent measures to ensure that service providers do not offer low-quality services that could jeopardize the entire system. In addition to adhering to accreditation criteria and service quality requirements, service providers must sign an ethical code of conduct, which ensures that services offered on the platform are appropriate. The district is particularly concerned about the risks posed by overbooking, low-quality or mismanagement problems, which could significantly impact the platform's reputation and the trust that citizens place in it.

welfarecomo

The platform *welfarecomo* operates within the Municipality of Como, a medium-sized city with a population of 85,543 inhabitants as of 2022. The city is characterized by an aging population that exceeds the regional and national averages, an overreliance on tourism that has resulted in high real estate prices that make it challenging for low-income residents to afford living in the area, and a significant polarization of wealth, with a concentration of both rich and poor citizens.

In early 2021, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, the Social Services Department of the Municipality of Como started providing food vouchers to low-income families who suffered a loss of income due to the health emergency. To ensure social distancing and provide a faster response to those in need, the department launched the *welfarecomo* platform, enabling easy application for vouchers and the selection of preferred grocery stores for redemption. The department was able to quickly implement this solution for two reasons: first, the public official who implemented the initiative had previously launched and managed the *Tradate Welfare* platform and brought that expertise to Como; and second, the municipality adopted the online

white-label platform *WelfareX*, designed and operated by the CGM Group, as a result of the pilot project developed with the district of Tradate. Besides Como, the digital platform *WelfareX* has been replicated in other local contexts, resulting in the creation of 18 additional local welfare platforms across Italy.

The *welfarecomo* platform has become a reliable tool for providing solidarity measures during emergencies, and it has recently been extended to support the management of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. The platform is available in both Italian and Ukrainian and facilitates peer-to-peer matchmaking between private citizens, local civil associations, and not-for-profit organizations who offer various forms of assistance such as shelter, reception for minors, job opportunities, language mediation, and school support to Ukrainian refugees. The Como Municipality's Social Services Office screens offers of help to ensure a certain level of service quality and manages the supply of services according to the number and characteristics of refugees arriving in the area.

The platform is funded by the municipality, can be accessed mainly online but also through a few local points managed by local not-for profit organizations, and is offered free of charge to all residents and refugees in the Como city. While it has primarily been utilized in times of crisis, the 2021-2023 Area Social Plan envisions scaling-up the platform to deliver additional welfare services to the community.

InCooperazione

The platform *InCooperazione* is active in the province of Trento, which has a population of 542,158 residents as of 2022. The province stands out for its lower unemployment rate and higher birth rate compared to the national average. Moreover, it is well-known for its robust welfare system, which emphasizes cooperation and associationism among citizens and local

businesses. Cooperatives play a significant role in the local economy, spanning across every economic sector and demonstrating a strong identity and resilience across economic cycles.

InCooperazione was created by the Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, a private association representing over 450 local cooperative businesses with a membership base of approximately 280,000 people. Although the platform was launched in 2019, its development began five years earlier when the association's innovation department recognized the potential to leverage its membership base to create a large buying group. By pooling demand for services, *InCooperazione* was created to offer local citizens a platform where they could access a range of services at competitive rates and conditions.

InCooperazione is a platform that comprises of a physical service card and an online app. Initially, the platform did not have a strong focus on welfare services. Instead, the first projects developed were centered around the provision of low-cost and environmentally sustainable electricity contracts, discounts in local shops, and access to affordable workspaces with fast connectivity. However, the platform's focus shifted towards welfare services after the pandemic outbreak. In collaboration with the Local Health Authority, *InCooperazione* supported access to the Covid-19 vaccination campaign. Currently, the platform is developing a specific project to create a community welfare offering that assesses citizens' needs through the platform and provides all available options to address those needs. The final aim is to create a one-stop-shop where citizens can find everything they need in one place, including public and private services, and informal services provided by other families and citizens.

InCooperazione adopts a freemium model, where users can access the platform for free, but specific services and features are available only to those who subscribe by paying a fee. The pricing levels depend on the subscription status, such as a local resident, worker in one of the cooperatives, or a member of the association. Initially, only not-for-profit service providers were allowed to be on the platform. However, after the startup phase, all types of service

providers can join through an accreditation mechanism that ensures minimum common quality standards and accountability levels.

The Provincia Autonoma di Trento, the territorial public authority, has been the main funder of *InCooperazione*, with an overall budget of approximately 5 million euros. Despite not being the initiator of the project, the authority recognized the importance of meeting the needs of the local community, and is committed to supporting the platform to ensure it is available to all citizens living in the area and is economically self-sustainable in the medium term.

Findings of the comparative case analysis

Macro, meso and micro antecedents for the development of local welfare platforms

Three aggregated themes emerged from the analysis of platforms' antecedents across the service ecosystem, based on the prevailing value objectives when engaging in co-creation: “*unlocking the power of collaboration: doing more by leveraging more*” (macro), “*optimizing limited resources: increasing efficiency, speed, and transparency of services*” (meso), and “*united we stand: the rise of collaborative consumption*” (micro).

Macro. Some platforms, such as *WeMi* and *Tradate Welfare*, were created in response to clearly defined policy objectives articulated in strategic welfare planning documents. In these cases, we observed that the platform development process started top-down. The aim of these processes was not merely to create a platform, but rather to create value for society by addressing increasingly complex societal needs of families and citizens. This involved moving beyond partial models of intervention and siloed approaches towards comprehensive welfare service provisioning that involves all actors within society. The guiding themes of these platforms can be defined as “*unlocking the power of collaboration: doing more by leveraging more,*” which emphasizes the coordination of under-utilized societal resources to address welfare and well-being, without necessarily reducing the role of the public sector in welfare.

The decision to develop a platform arose from a participatory planning and co-design process, in which the platform was identified as the most effective tool to support this service co-creation approach. In these cases, the process was triggered by the observation of ongoing societal changes and platformization trends across multiple sectors. In the case of *WeMi*, political pressures and a desire for reform were additional catalysts for the platform's development.

Meso. Another group of platforms, exemplified by *welfarecomo*, were found to emerge in response to meso-level organizational needs and were developed using a middle-out approach. Public sector organizations created these platforms as one of several tools to transform welfare service delivery, with the aim of generating organizational value and achieving more outcomes with fewer resources. The guiding principle of these cases can be defined as “*optimizing limited resources: increasing efficiency, speed, and transparency of services*,” which emphasizes the need to streamline operations while strengthening collaboration with the private sector and the public. In these cases, the development process was triggered by a new service culture within the administration that prioritized simplifying and streamlining processes, reducing administrative burden for social workers and enabling them to focus on value-added activities. It also empowered citizens and families with improved and extended access to services, including 24/7 access, and more transparent information to make informed choices. Emergencies and turbulence, such as the Covid-19 outbreak, served as catalysts to expedite platform development, with the aim to more easily activate service providers and connect with dispersed and socially isolated service users.

Micro. A third group of platforms, exemplified by *InCooperazione*, emerged through a bottom-up approach, originating from the demands and needs of citizens and local community associations. These platforms function as tools to pool the requirements and interests of citizens and enhance their bargaining power, thereby generating value for individual users by enabling

them to access services at more favorable conditions. The driving theme behind the development of these platforms can be defined as “*united we stand: the rise of collaborative consumption*,” which emphasizes the proactive role of citizens, who have become increasingly assertive, competent, and empowered. By coming together through a platform that addresses their collective needs, citizens can play a more active role in governance decisions that affect their quality of life. The development of these platforms was found to be facilitated by proactive citizens, and the existence of strong local communities, and associations. This approach signifies a shift towards citizen empowerment and participation in governance, which encourages governments to listen to and work closely with citizens to co-create solutions that meet their needs.

Our analysis revealed that the top-down and middle-out approaches involve a government organization or unit responsible for developing and administering the platform, serving as the central hub that orchestrates other involved organizations and service providers. In contrast, the bottom-up approach involves civil society organizations representing citizens and communities in developing the platform and acting as a cornerstone. While we did not assess the outcomes of the different platforms, we found that the top-down approach has an advantage in enabling greater integration of the platform with existing public services and systems.

Enablers and inhibitors to the development of local welfare platforms

The analysis conducted has identified both enablers and barriers that impact co-creation, and these are presented in Table 3 and further elaborated on below. It is worth noting that although our analysis revealed the prevailing themes at the macro, meso, and micro levels in the development of platforms, it is crucial to recognize that enablers and inhibitors across the different levels of the public service ecosystem are interdependent and equally significant in the development of such initiatives.

***** Insert Table 3 here *****

Enablers. The enablers that facilitate the development of co-creation platforms include organizational-level factors such as creating dedicated structures with dedicated human and financial resources, promoting learning, and providing tools to enhance public officials' understanding of co-creation platforms, fostering a culture that values innovation, and exchange, and promotes boundary-spanning across different organizations, and participation in networks. External macro-level enablers, such as political pressure and policies that encourage co-creation and collaboration, were also found to play a relevant role in facilitating the development of such initiatives. Mimetic isomorphism, which suggests that neighboring public sector organizations' adoption of co-creation platforms increased the likelihood of other public sector organizations developing such projects, emerged as another interesting macro-level enabler. We identified several individual-level enablers, including the presence of proactive citizens who value participation and community engagement, as well as skilled and digitally ready social workers committed to shifting from traditional casework to a case management approach. Furthermore, the motivation, commitment, and entrepreneurship of public officials responsible for implementing the solution, and their willingness to experiment with new social policy models, were found to be significant enablers in all four cases analyzed.

Inhibitors. One of the most prominent barriers for the development of co-creation platforms was the low readiness of private and third sectors service providers to engage in co-creation and to structure their services towards citizens, due to their ingrained familiarity with more traditional welfare systems. They were found to be accustomed to interacting with the public sector, which used to procure services, rather than playing a more proactive role. The rigid public procurement and accreditation procedures at the meso organizational level also posed a significant challenge, hindering the creation of dynamic ecosystems required for co-creation success. Inadequate internal expertise with digital tools, omnichannel, and market-oriented

approach has led to poor promotion of services and platforms, resulting in a subpar platform user experience and adoption. Additionally, public officials' involvement in co-creation initiatives was often perceived as too time-consuming. In contexts with less proactive and empowered citizens, who do not feel comfortable making use of platforms and collaboration tools, there was a risk of further empowering only the already empowered, while potentially leaving others dissatisfied.

Discussion and conclusions

The present study offers valuable insights into the co-creation processes facilitated by platforms. By situating co-creation platforms within the public service ecosystem framework, this research makes two significant contributions to the existing literature. Firstly, it addresses the scarcity of studies drawing on the notion of the public service ecosystem and responds to calls for more research on the ecosystem perspective in public management (Osborne et al., 2021, 2022). Secondly, the study addresses the lack of attention paid to contextual factors that shape co-creation processes and takes a more holistic approach by examining antecedents at various levels, including political and societal factors, organizational circumstances, and individual conditions. Therefore, our examination of the complex interplay between different actors and factors across the ecosystem highlights that platforms must be situated within their context to spur co-creation of services and public value (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Voorberg et al., 2015).

Our findings confirm the importance of integrating co-creation platforms into broader policy objectives and strategic planning, enabling greater integration with existing public services and systems (Ongaro et al., 2021). However, on the other hand, they recognize that co-creation is not solely initiated by the government, as the shift towards a government orchestrating role should also consider stakeholders' autonomy and proactive initiatives in co-creation, especially

in the context of more empowered and assertive citizenry and private and third sectors (Janssen & Estevez, 2013; Parrado et al., 2013). Therefore, while the government can act as a leader of co-creation platforms, it can also prove useful as a catalyst for private and civil society platforms, for example by supporting them through funding (Meijer & Boon, 2021; Thompson & Venters, 2021). This emphasizes the need to embrace a more inclusive, collaborative, and bottom-up approach to public service co-creation.

Our findings have also several important managerial implications for the implementation of co-creation platforms. First, in line with previous research, our findings emphasize the importance of creating ad hoc organizational structures that allows for greater flexibility and entrepreneurship in developing solutions (Sicilia et al., 2019). However, it is also important to note that without adequate organizational and political support towards these separated entities, there is a risk of increasing complexity and fragmentation in the implementation process. Secondly, our study challenges previous research findings (e.g., Scognamiglio et al., 2022), and suggests that co-creation platforms are particularly effective in turbulent times and well-suited to address complex challenges and emergencies. Our cases of co-creation platforms have been particularly effective during the Covid-19 pandemic, leveraging existing structures and technologies to ensure continuity of services, effectively connecting dispersed and isolated citizens with service providers. Moreover, our study has revealed that co-creation platforms exhibit a multichannel approach, encompassing various mediums such as phone, applications, web portals, physical points, and in-person assistance. This approach enables greater accessibility and inclusivity, potentially addressing some of the digital divide inequalities that exist in society and improving access to services (Kleinhans et al., 2022; van den Berg et al., 2020; Xu & Tang, 2020). However, this approach does not always provide a smooth and integrated experience across different channels. Adopting a more omnichannel approach would

enhance citizen satisfaction and loyalty, as well as reduce the burden on service providers by simplifying the service delivery process.

In conclusion, our study highlights that platforms can serve as a powerful tool for facilitating the co-creation of public services and empowering individuals and communities to take more control over their own well-being. However, the development of these platforms is contingent upon careful attention to contextual factors and support at the macro, meso, and micro levels.

Limitations and further research

This study has some limitations that should be considered in future research. The main limitation is that the study only examined the antecedents of co-creation platforms, without assessing their actual impact on public service delivery. All the platforms analyzed are at an early stage of development, and no conclusive assessment of their success can be made. Future research should adopt a longitudinal approach to monitor and evaluate the value generated for society, public sector organizations and individuals by these initiatives, taking into account the antecedents identified in this study. By doing so, future research can determine whether co-creation platforms are effective in generating value across the service ecosystem and identify factors that contribute to their success. Another limitation is that this study focuses on co-creation platforms in Northern Italy and may not be generalizable to other contexts. While the antecedents identified in this study are expected to be relevant to other co-creation platforms, contextual variation between countries and welfare systems is not accounted for. Future research should examine co-creation platforms in other contexts, such as different regions or countries, to determine whether the factors identified in this study apply more broadly.

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Tables

Table 1: Sample characteristics

	Case Study 1 <i>We-Mi</i>	Case Study 2 <i>Tradate Welfare</i>	Case Study 3 <i>welfarecomo</i>	Case Study 4 <i>InCooperazione</i>
Year of inception of the platform	2015	2018	2021	2019
Stage of development	Fully operational	Fully operational	Scale-up phase	Under development*
Region	Lombardy	Lombardy	Lombardy	Trentino Alto-Adige
Territorial reference area	City of Milano	8 small neighboring cities in the province of Varese	City of Como	Province of Trento
Population in reference area	1,396,673	55,305	85,543	542,158
Type of platform leader	Local public administration	Local public administration	Local public administration	Civil society organization

*The platform offers multiple services; only the welfare service offer is under development.

Table 2: Descriptive data on the case studies

	Case Study 1 <i>We-Mi</i>	Case Study 2 <i>Tradate Welfare</i>	Case Study 3 <i>welfarecomo</i>	Case Study 4 <i>InCooperazione</i>
Platform media channels	Online platform, 20 neighborhood spaces, dedicated call center	Online platform, 4 neighborhood spaces, dedicated call center	Online platform, 2 neighborhood spaces	Online platform, service card
Type of welfare service offered	Health, leisure, education, elderly and family care, housing, language training and financial inclusion for foreigners	Health, leisure, education, elderly and family care, housing, and pet care	Food vouchers, reception of Ukrainian refugees	Co-working spaces, electricity contracts, access to vaccines; other welfare services to be implemented in the near future
Target users	All citizens living in the area	All citizens living in the area	Public assistance program users	All citizens living in the area
Service providers involved	Initially only not-for-profit organizations; now, for-profit service providers with accreditation are also allowed	Local cooperatives with accreditation	Initially only local cooperatives with accreditation; now, civil society associations and private citizens offering services are also allowed	Initially only not-for-profit organizations; now, for-profit service providers with accreditation are also allowed
Type of platform-mediated relationship	Peer-to-peer matchmaking and e-commerce of services	Peer-to-peer matchmaking and e-commerce of services	Peer-to-peer matchmaking	Peer-to-peer matchmaking and e-commerce of services
Platform leader	Municipality of Milano	District of Tradate	Municipality of Como	Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione
Platform provider	Municipality of Milano	WelfareX (private for-profit platform provider)	WelfareX (private for-profit platform provider)	Archimede.nu (private for-profit platform provider)
Funding and pricing	Funded by both local foundations and the public sector, including EU funds	Funded by the public sector; provided free of charge to	Funded by the public sector; provided free of charge to citizens and service providers	Funded by the public sector; freemium access for citizens;

and resources from the Municipality of Milan; provided free of charge to citizens; service providers pay an annual fee	citizens; service providers pay an annual fee	service providers pay an annual fee
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Table 3: Macro, meso and micro enablers and inhibitors of co-creation platforms

	Enablers	Inhibitors
Macro-level (societal)	▪ Political commitment and leadership ▪ Clear policies that promote and incentivize cross-sector collaboration and co-creation ▪ Mimetic isomorphism pressures	▪ Low readiness of private and third sector service providers and stakeholders to co-creation
Meso-level (organizational)	▪ Dedicated organizational structures with greater flexibility ▪ Availability of ad hoc funding opportunities ▪ Learning and training opportunities for public officials and social workers ▪ Participation in networks and partnerships ▪ Organizational culture that values innovation, experimentation, and third-party input	▪ Dedicated organizational structures perceived as “external” to public administration ▪ Rigidity of public procurement and accreditation procedures ▪ Inadequate internal expertise with digital tools, omnichannel approach and market-oriented projects ▪ Risk-adverse and inward-looking organizational culture
Micro-level (individual)	▪ Proactive and empowered citizens ▪ Motivation, commitment, and entrepreneurship of public officials ▪ Skilled and digital ready social workers	▪ Passive and unengaged citizens ▪ Co-creation perceived as too time consuming by public officials

Supplementary materials

Appendix A: List of local welfare platforms in Italy

This appendix presents an alphabetically organized list of local welfare platforms available in Italy as of February 2023. The list includes the name of the platform, the city and region where it operates, the year of its establishment, its corresponding website, and whether the platform is managed by a local public administration or a civil society organization. We compiled this information through a search on Google and consultations with key individuals and institutions. Please note that this list is not exhaustive, and some of the details provided may be subject to change over time.

Name of the platform	City	Region	Year of inception	Platform leader	Website
Abruzzo Welfare	Chieti	Abruzzo	2020	Civil society organization	https://abruzzowelfare.it/chieti/
Bari Welfare	Bari	Puglia	2020	Civil society organization	https://bariwelfare.it/bari/
Bergamo Care	Bergamo	Lombardy	2023	Local public administration	n.a.
Biella Welfare	Biella	Piemonte	2020	Civil society organization	https://biellawelfare.it/biella/
Bologna Welfare	Bologna	Emilia Romagna	2019	Local public administration	https://www.comune.bologna.it/servizi-informazioni/app-bologna-welfare
Centro Servizi Welfare	Verona	Veneto	2021	Civil society organization	https://serviziwelfare.it/csw/chi-siamo
Como Fratelli Tutti	Como	Lombardy	2021	Civil society organization	https://www.cittafratellitutti.it
Family like	Novara	Piemonte	2019	Local public administration	https://www.familylike.it
Familydea	Bolzano	Trentino Alto-Adige	2015	Civil society organization	https://www.familydea.it/
InCooperazione	Trento	Trentino Alto-Adige	2023	Civil society organization	https://www.incooperazione.it/it

La Cura è di Casa	Verbano-Cusio-Ossola	Piemonte	2019	Local public administration	https://www.lacuraedicasa.org/
Lario Welfare	Erba	Lombardy	2021	Local public administration	https://lariowelfare.it/lario/
Matera Welfare	Matera	Basilicata	2020	Civil society organization	https://materawelfare.it/matera/
Napoli Welfare	Napoli	Campania	2020	Civil society organization	https://napoliwelfare.it/napoli/
Rho Welfare	Rho	Lombardy	2020	Civil society organization	https://rhowelfare.it/rho/
Salerno Welfare	Salerno	Campania	2020	Civil society organization	https://salernowelfare.it/salerno/
Sondrio Welfare	Sondrio	Lombardy	2020	Civil society organization	https://sondriowelfare.it/sondrio/
Spazio Aperto Servizi	Milano	Lombardy	2020	Civil society organization	https://sasognigiornoconte.spazioapertooservizi.org/spazioapertoservizi/
Torino Welfare	Torino	Piemonte	2020	Civil society organization	https://torinowelfare.it/torino/
Tradate Welfare	Varese	Lombardy	2018	Local public administration	https://tradatewelfare.it/tradate/
Trapani Welfare	Trapani	Sicilia	2020	Civil society organization	https://trapaniwelfare.it/trapani/
WeForli	Forli	Emilia Romagna	2020	Civil society organization	https://weforli.it/forli/
Welfare Beatrice	Bergamo	Lombardy	2019	Local public administration	https://www.welfarebeatrice.it
Welfare Bene Comune	Padova	Veneto	2020	Local public administration	https://welfarebenecomune.it/wbc/
Welfare in Unione	Ferrara	Emilia Romagna	2022	Local public administration	https://welfareinunione.it/argenta/
Welfare Vicenza	Vicenza	Veneto	2021	Civil society organization	https://welfarevicenza.it/vicenza/
Welfare X Cremona	Cremona	Lombardy	2020	Civil society organization	https://welfarexcremona.it/cremona/
welfarecomo	Como	Lombardy	2021	Local public administration	https://welfarecomo.it/como/
WeMi	Milano	Lombardy	2015	Local public administration	https://wemi.comune.milano.it

Appendix B: Detailed Data Sources for Case Studies

This appendix provides a detailed list of the primary and secondary data sources utilized in the case studies presented in this paper.

Number and short description of sources consulted				
Types of sources	Case Study 1 <i>We-Mi</i>	Case Study 2 <i>Tradate Welfare</i>	Case Study 3 <i>welfarecomo</i>	Case Study 4 <i>InCooperazione</i>
Policy documents	3 Strategic Welfare Plans (2012-2015; 2015-2018; 2018-2020)	3 Area Social Plans (2015-2018; 2019-2020; 2021-2023) 1 Regulation of social services	2 Area Social Plans (2018-2020; 2021-2023)	1 monitoring and planning report on the economic and social situation of Trentino 2021 1 agreement between Federazione della Cooperazione Trentina and Provincia Autonoma di Trento
Websites	https://wemi.comune.milano.it	https://tradatewelfare.it/ https://welfarex.it/x/home	https://welfarecomo.it/ https://welfarex.it/x/home	https://www.incooperazione.it/it https://www.cooperazionetrentina.it/it https://www.archimede.nu
Project documents and reports	2 internal project presentations	2 internal project presentations 1 guidelines on quality requirements of providers of welfare services 5 notices and calls for tender issued by the municipality	1 internal project presentation 3 notices and calls for tender issued by the municipality	1 internal project presentation 1 budget document

Articles on newspapers	▪ 3 articles on local newspaper ▪ 1 article on specialized magazine	▪ 5 articles on local newspaper ▪ 3 articles on specialized magazines	▪ 4 articles on local newspaper	▪ 2 articles on local newspaper
Other research reports	▪ 1 study report by WePlat Università Cattolica	▪ 1 study report by WePlat Università Cattolica ▪ 1 study report by WILL	▪ 1 study report by WePlat Università Cattolica	▪ 1 study report by WePlat Università Cattolica ▪ 1 research report by Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione
Observation	▪ 2 authors participated to the development of the Strategic Welfare Plans (2012 and 2015) ▪ 1 author participated to development project meetings			▪ 1 author supported Federazione della Cooperazione Trentina for the development of the service model
Interviews	▪ 1 in-depth interview with former responsible public official ▪ 1 in-depth interview with project manager	▪ 1 in-depth interview with responsible public official ▪ 1 in-depth interview with project manager of private platform provider	▪ 1 in-depth interview with responsible public official ▪ 1 in-depth interview with project manager of private platform provider	▪ 1 in-depth interview with project manager

Appendix C: Interview questionnaire

This appendix contains the semi-structured interview questionnaire that was utilized during open-ended interviews with key stakeholders who were involved in the development of local welfare platforms, including public officials, project managers, and service providers.

#	Question	Interest in knowledge
1. Introduction		
1.1	For local welfare platforms we mean both digital and physical structures which facilitate and enable the collaboration of multiple actors, including government, businesses, and citizens in the delivery of welfare services. We are focusing only on platforms for the delivery of welfare services. We exclude platforms for voting, and policymaking, as well as the use of or interaction with social media by the government and citizens.	Context of the study
1.3	We are interested in the antecedent factors that enabled and constrained the launch and development of the platform.	Aim of the study
1.4	The interview will take about 60 minutes. The questions will be open. Please answer spontaneously and feel free to add any detail that you think might be relevant. If you have any questions, feel free to ask them.	Structure of the interview
2. Case description		
2.1	Please provide a summary description of the initiative, including the core features of the platform and the service offered.	Project overview
2.2	Please describe your role in the project.	Interviewee role
2.3	When was the platform project first initiated? When was the platform made available to users? What is the current stage of the project?	Project maturity
2.4	Who are the platform users? What are the rules of access to the platform? What control and monitoring mechanisms are in place to manage interactions on the platform?	Users and governance
2.5	Who provided the initial funding to develop the platform? Who is currently providing funding to sustain the platform's ongoing operations?	Budget and funding
3. Project antecedents		
3.1	What was the motivation behind starting the project? What were the intended goals or objectives of the platform?	Goals and intended outcomes

3.2	Who are the partners involved in the project? What are the roles of each partner in the development and implementation of the project? Who originally initiated the development of the project, and how did their involvement influence its development and direction?	Actors involved and project initiator
4. Enablers and inhibitors		
4.1	What were the primary external factors that facilitated or hindered the project's development and implementation? Did the project receive any pressure or attention from political entities, the media, or the public? If so, what was the nature of this pressure or attention?	Macro-level enablers and inhibitors
4.2	What were the primary organizational factors that facilitated or hindered the project's development and implementation? Did the platform receive support from top management within the organization, and if so, to what extent? Was there a dedicated team for the project, and if so, how large was it relative to the rest of the organization? Did your organization possess the necessary competencies and skills to effectively implement the project? How would you describe the culture of your organization, particularly in terms of its attitudes towards innovation and risk-taking?	Meso-level enablers and inhibitors
4.3	What were the key individual-level factors that either facilitated or hindered the development and implementation of the project? Were there any specific individuals who played a significant role in initiating and/or committing to the project, and if so, how did they influence the project's development? As someone who has been involved in the project development, how would you describe the level of empowerment and autonomy you experienced?	Micro-level enablers and inhibitors
5. Conclusion		
5.1	Based on your experience with the project, what would you say are the key "lessons learned"? Is there anything else you would like to share about the project?	Further information
5.2	Would you recommend interviewing other stakeholders involved in the project, such as platform users, service providers, the platform provider, or public officials? Are you aware of any other local welfare platforms operating in your city, region, or country that may be worth exploring?	Snowball sampling