

COPRODUCTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN PUBLIC SERVICES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Arrahman Syafebri^{1*}, Andries Lionardo²,
Raniasa Putra³, Muhammad Nur Budiyanto⁴, Hatta. M. Saleh⁵

^{*12345}*Universitas Sriwijaya, Indralaya, Indonesia*

^{*1}*Correspondence Author Email: arrahmansyafebri@fisip.unsri.ac.id*

ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between coproduction and social inclusion in public service delivery through a Systematic Literature Review of 36 articles published between 2020 and 2024. The analysis employed thematic and bibliometric techniques using VOSviewer. The findings reveal that coproduction practices tend to be exclusive and have not optimally engaged marginalized groups. Effective inclusion requires deliberative institutional design and the active role of public administrators as facilitators. This study contributes to strengthening a justice-based coproduction model and promotes more participatory and equitable public service reform.

Keywords: Coproduction, Public Service, Social Inclusion, Participatory Governance, Bibliometric Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Public services constitute a cornerstone of state legitimacy and social cohesion, as they reflect the government's capacity to respond to citizens' needs and promote inclusive development. In the context of global governance, pressures on governments to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability have intensified, particularly with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize inclusive institutions, reduced inequalities, and participatory decision-making as prerequisites for sustainable progress [1]. Consequently, the search for innovative governance strategies has become central to public administration scholarship and practice.

Within this broader paradigm, coproduction has emerged as a transformative approach, shifting citizens' roles from passive service recipients to active partners in policy formulation, service design, and delivery. Coproduction has been praised for its potential to increase efficiency, foster trust, and improve service quality by mobilizing citizen knowledge, resources, and networks [2,3]. However, while the model is widely promoted, its application often reveals asymmetries: citizens with higher socio-economic capital, digital literacy, or organizational resources tend to dominate, while vulnerable groups are marginalized. This paradox raises critical questions about whether coproduction contributes to democratic equality or inadvertently entrenches existing inequalities.

A growing body of research explores coproduction's impact on effectiveness, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction. Seminal contributions by Osborne et al. (2016), Nabatchi et al. (2017), and Bovaird & Loeffler (2013) conceptualize coproduction as a vehicle for collaborative governance and improved service outcomes. Yet, despite the proliferation of literature, a research gap remains: limited attention has been devoted to the equity and inclusion dimensions of coproduction, particularly in contexts where structural inequalities are deeply entrenched. Studies focusing on marginalized populations—such as

the poor, disabled, or digitally excluded—are scarce, and few analyses address how administrators can actively design institutions that promote meaningful inclusion [2,6,7].

This study seeks to advance the debate by systematically reviewing literature on coproduction and social inclusion published between 2020 and 2024. By applying bibliometric mapping and thematic synthesis, it provides a state of the art overview of how the discourse has evolved and identifies emergent themes linking coproduction with justice, equity, and distributive inclusion. The bibliometric analysis reveals temporal and thematic shifts, showing that while earlier studies emphasized efficiency and participation, recent research increasingly engages with equity-oriented frameworks, signaling a paradigm shift in the field.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it extends the Four Co's Model (co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment) with a justice-based perspective, positioning coproduction not only as a managerial innovation but also as a normative framework for democratic equality. Practically, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for public administrators and policymakers to institutionalize inclusive practices, ensuring that marginalized voices are substantively integrated into governance. The urgency of this agenda justifies the focus of this article, titled *"Coproduction and Social Inclusion in Public Services: A Systematic Literature Review,"* as it addresses one of the most pressing challenges in modern governance: reconciling efficiency with equity to realize socially just public service systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach with an exploratory qualitative design to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical findings on coproduction and inclusion in public administration. The PRISMA protocol was employed to ensure transparency and replicability throughout the review process [4]. The bibliometric mapping tool VOSviewer version 1.6.20 was used to visualize thematic clusters, keyword co-occurrence, and conceptual linkages among the reviewed literature.

The population of this study comprises peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2024, obtained from Scopus and Web of Science databases. Articles were selected using purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) written in English, (2) full-text accessible, and (3) explicitly addressing themes of coproduction, citizen participation, and/or social inclusion in public service contexts. A total of 36 articles met these criteria. Selection was independently conducted by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through consensus to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Data collection involved systematic keyword searches using combinations such as "coproduction," "public inclusion," "citizen engagement," and "public service delivery." Thematic content analysis followed the six-step method of Braun and Clarke (2021), enabling categorization of findings into conceptual domains. VOSviewer was used to construct bibliometric maps illustrating inter-article connections, co-authorship, and topic proximity. The use of PRISMA ensured methodological validity, while cross-checking enhanced reliability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic review of 36 selected articles revealed that the concept of coproduction in public service delivery has evolved significantly—from a participatory approach to a transformative strategy that supports effectiveness, legitimacy, and social sustainability. Bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer identified five dominant thematic clusters: (1) coproduction and service effectiveness, (2) citizen participation and trust, (3) social inclusion and distributive justice, (4) the role of public administrators in enabling coproduction, and (5) structural challenges in engaging marginalized groups. These clusters reflect the growing scholarly consensus that coproduction must be inclusive and equity-oriented to address complex societal needs [5–7].

Table 1. Distribution of reviewed articles by thematic focus (n = 36).

Thematic cluster	Number of articles	Percentage (%)
Coproduction and service effectiveness	10	27.8
Citizen participation and trust	7	19.4
Social inclusion and distributive justice	6	16.7
Role of public administrators	7	19.4
Structural challenges in engaging marginalized groups	6	16.7
Total	36	100

Source: Author’s own analysis (Systematic Literature Review, 2025).

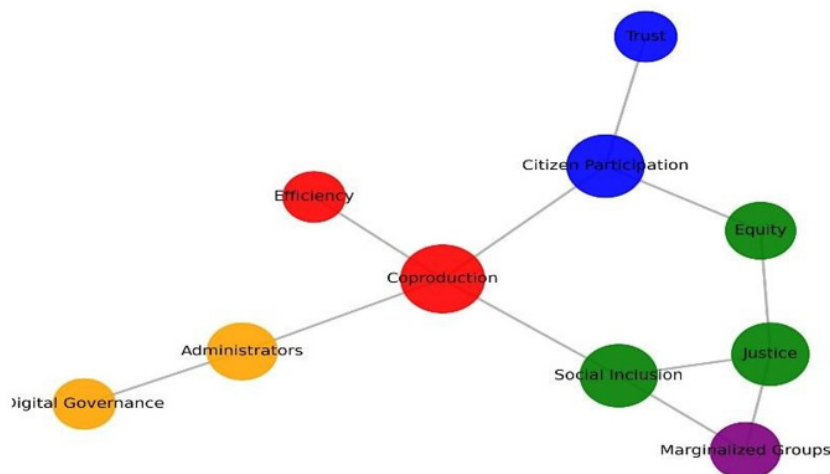


Figure 1. Network visualization of keyword co-occurrence from 36 reviewed articles (2020–2024).

The visualization reveals five main clusters of scholarly discourse on coproduction and inclusion: (1) coproduction and service effectiveness (red), (2) citizen participation and trust (blue), (3) social inclusion and distributive justice (green), (4) the role of administrators (orange), and (5) structural challenges in engaging marginalized groups (purple). Node size reflects keyword frequency, while links represent co-occurrence strength.

The findings also indicate that coproduction is predominantly implemented during the service delivery phase, rather than during planning or evaluation. This aligns with critiques that coproduction is often constrained to functional rather than deliberative engagement. Expanding citizen participation across all policy phases—co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment—is essential for democratic and accountable governance [8].

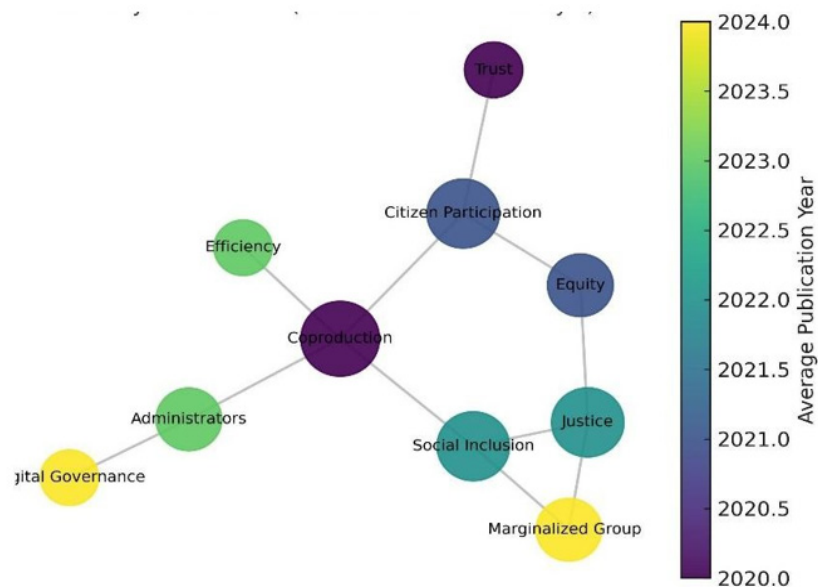


Figure 2. Overlay visualization of keyword co-occurrence by publication year (2020–2024).

Colors correspond to the average publication year associated with each keyword, with lighter tones indicating more recent studies. Emerging attention is evident in keywords such as “social inclusion” and “marginalized groups,” suggesting that equity-oriented perspectives in coproduction have gained traction in the latest wave of publications.

Moreover, the inclusion of marginalized groups in coproduction remains limited. Without affirmative strategies, coproduction risks reproducing structural inequalities by primarily engaging those with higher education, digital literacy, or socio-economic capital. This reflects the concept of “internal exclusion,” where marginalized actors are formally present but lack real influence [9]. Addressing such asymmetries requires critical reflection on who is invited, who speaks, and who benefits from coproduction processes.

Theoretically, this study supports the idea of coproduction as a vehicle for social equity, not just service efficiency. Inclusion should not merely be about numeric representation, but about enabling diverse voices to shape public decisions substantively. This aligns with the justice-based perspective advanced by deliberative democracy scholars [10]. Extending the Four Co’s Model with a justice lens helps realign coproduction with principles of democratic equality.

The density map highlights areas of concentrated scholarly focus, with warm colors (yellow–red) denoting highly frequent keywords. The densest regions are centered around “coproduction” and “citizen participation,” indicating that these remain the dominant conceptual anchors, whereas inclusion-related terms appear in less dense areas, reflecting their relatively emergent status.

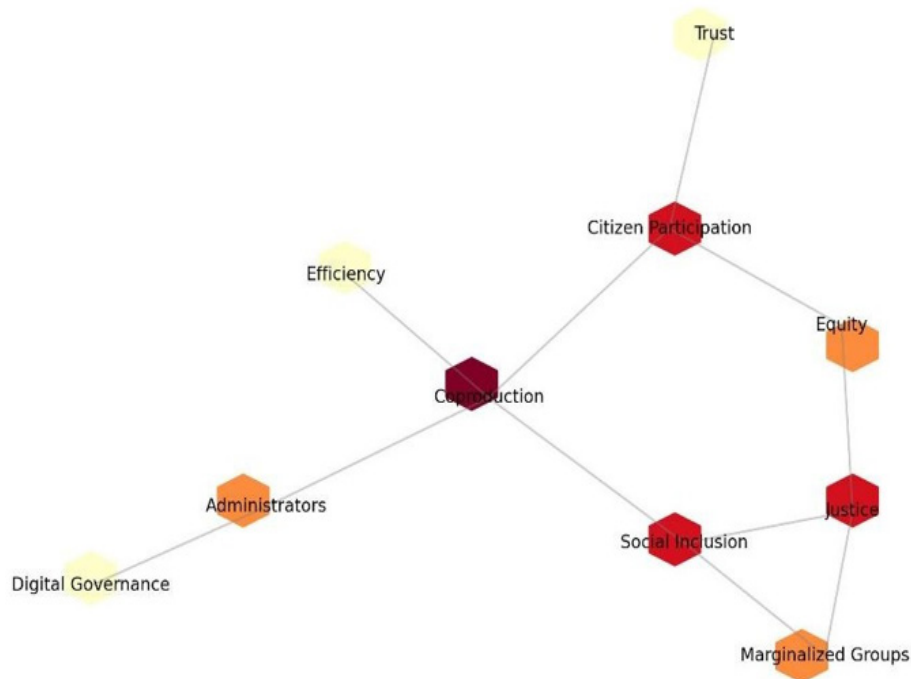


Figure 3. Density Visualization Of Keyword Co-Occurrence From 36 Reviewed Articles.

Practically, the success of inclusive coproduction depends heavily on the roles and capacities of public administrators. Administrators serve as gatekeepers who can either facilitate or hinder meaningful participation. Their willingness to adapt procedures, communicate across cultural divides, and recognize asymmetries of power is central to equitable service design. In contrast, technocratic or efficiency-driven mindsets often lead to tokenistic inclusion [11].

Several enabling factors were identified across the literature: adaptive deliberative formats (e.g., citizen panels, peer-to-peer forums), logistical support (e.g., stipends, transportation), and collaboration with civil society organizations to reach underrepresented communities. Conversely, barriers include rigid administrative procedures, lack of budgetary flexibility, and political reluctance to cede decision-making power. These findings suggest that institutional reforms must accompany procedural innovations for coproduction to fulfill its inclusive potential [12,13].

Tensions were also noted between individualized approaches (e.g., person-centered care) and collective equality goals. While personalization enhances relevance and responsiveness, it may obscure systemic inequalities that affect access and outcomes. Scholars caution against reducing public service reform to interpersonal solutions, urging systemic analysis of how class, race, gender, and disability shape participation and outcomes [14].

Despite its contributions, this review faces limitations. The restriction to English-language literature may exclude valuable regional insights, especially from the Global South. Furthermore, bibliometric analysis—while effective in mapping conceptual trends—offers limited depth regarding the normative and contextual nuances of coproduction practices. Future studies could benefit from ethnographic or comparative methods to explore how inclusion unfolds across diverse policy and cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

This review affirms that inclusive coproduction holds significant promise for democratizing public service delivery. However, achieving this ideal requires more than open invitations to participate; it demands strong institutional commitment, the adoption of redistributive mechanisms, and a transformation of bureaucratic mindsets. The synthesis of 36 reviewed articles demonstrates that while coproduction has gained recognition as a collaborative governance model, its inclusive dimension remains underdeveloped. The engagement of marginalized groups is often symbolic rather than substantive, indicating that without deliberate institutional design, coproduction may reinforce rather than reduce inequalities.

To advance inclusive coproduction, public administrators must act not only as service providers but also as facilitators of equity by creating participatory spaces that are accessible, representative, and responsive to diverse citizen needs. Integrating justice-oriented principles into the Four Co's Model co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment emerges as a crucial step toward embedding social justice in public service reform. This requires rethinking participation beyond numerical representation to ensure that marginalized voices shape outcomes in meaningful ways.

Despite its contributions, this review highlights several limitations in the current body of knowledge. Most studies originate from developed contexts, leaving the experiences of the Global South underexplored, even though inequalities are often more severe there. Moreover, research has predominantly examined coproduction during the delivery phase, with limited attention to agenda-setting and evaluation stages where power imbalances can be challenged more effectively.

Future research should therefore broaden the contextual scope by examining inclusive coproduction in diverse socio-political and cultural settings, particularly in developing countries. Methodologically, there is a need for ethnographic, longitudinal, and comparative approaches that can capture the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion over time. Attention to intersectionality is also crucial, as dimensions of gender, race, class, and disability intersect to shape citizens' capacity to participate. Furthermore, the growing reliance on digital governance warrants investigation into whether digital tools foster or hinder inclusive coproduction, especially for communities facing digital divides. Finally, empirical studies evaluating the long-term impacts of inclusive coproduction on service quality, equity, and institutional trust would provide valuable evidence to inform both scholarship and practice.

In conclusion, coproduction holds the potential to bridge efficiency with equity, but realizing this promise requires deliberate institutional innovation, administrative capacity, and a justice-oriented framework. By addressing the identified gaps and pursuing the proposed research agenda, future studies can contribute to building public service systems that are not only efficient but also socially just, equitable, and genuinely democratic.

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