PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR

ENHANCING CO-PROGRAMMING INTERVENTIONS BY PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Facilitare le giovani mamme straniere all'inserimento nel tessuto sociale

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Practical Guide for Enhancing Co-Programming Interventions by Public Authorities

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

This guide has been developed within the framework of the European project "Facilitating the Social Integration of Young Migrant Mothers" to support public authorities in enhancing their collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) through co-programming. Co-programming is a form of collaborative governance that allows public institutions and non-profit actors to jointly plan and design public policies and services.

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2. Understanding Co-Programming in the Public Sector

Co-programming refers to the structured, formal, and inclusive involvement of civil society in the planning, formulation, and design of public policies, services, and strategies. It is a participatory approach grounded in democratic principles, which shifts the traditional top-down governance model towards a more horizontal, partnership-based dynamic. In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs), community groups, and informal networks are not merely consulted but become active co-creators of public interventions.

This participatory model is especially crucial when addressing complex social challenges, such as the inclusion of young migrant mothers, whose needs may not be fully captured by standardized public service models. By involving them and the organizations that represent them directly in the early stages of policy design, co-programming ensures more relevant, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes.

Co-programming differs from simple consultation in that it establishes a continuous and reciprocal relationship between institutions and civil society, characterized by:

- **Mutual trust:** built over time through transparency, openness, and respect.
- **Power-sharing:** decisions are made collaboratively rather than unilaterally.
- **Accountability:** all actors are responsible for the design and results of shared interventions.
- **Inclusiveness:** special attention is given to marginalized voices, such as young migrant mothers, ensuring they are not only heard but influence outcomes.

Key characteristics of co-programming include:

- **Shared agenda-setting**: Both public institutions and CSOs work together to define priorities, identify problems, and agree on objectives.
- **Collaborative decision-making**: Policies, programs, and services are co-designed through joint working groups, task forces, or committees composed of institutional and civil society actors.

- **Equal recognition of civil society contributions**: The knowledge, expertise, and lived experiences of CSOs are valued on par with institutional knowledge, giving legitimacy to bottom-up perspectives.
- **Structured dialogue processes**: Regular and transparent communication channels are established through forums, assemblies, participatory meetings, and digital platforms to support ongoing collaboration.

Effective co-programming requires not only technical capacity and resources but also a shift in institutional culture, with a willingness to embrace participation as a strength rather than a challenge. It also demands that CSOs strengthen their capacity to engage constructively and represent diverse community interests with integrity and consistency.

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3. Strategic Benefits of Co-Programming

Implementing co-programming mechanisms brings a wide range of tangible and intangible benefits that improve governance quality, service delivery, and democratic legitimacy. Among the most significant advantages are:

- **Improved relevance and quality of public services**: When policies are co-designed with civil society actors, especially those representing marginalized communities, the resulting services are more tailored to the actual needs of citizens. This leads to increased efficiency, better user satisfaction, and higher rates of service uptake.
- **Increased trust in public institutions**: Transparent and inclusive processes foster mutual understanding and accountability. Citizens feel heard and represented, which enhances their perception of fairness and boosts civic engagement.
- **Empowerment of marginalized groups**: Co-programming gives voice and agency to those often excluded from policy discussions, such as young migrant mothers. Their active participation enables them to influence decisions that affect their lives, promoting social justice and equality.
- **Stronger and more resilient social networks**: Through structured collaboration, public institutions and CSOs create long-lasting partnerships. These networks are essential for coordinated responses in times of crisis and for ensuring continuity of support in underserved communities.

- **More efficient use of public resources**: By involving stakeholders from the beginning, co-programming reduces the risk of policy failure, mismatched services, and costly corrections. Resources are invested in more informed and effective initiatives.

- **Innovation through diversity of perspectives**: Bringing together institutional knowledge and grassroots experience encourages creative solutions and policy innovation, especially for complex challenges that require multifaceted approaches.

- **Capacity building and knowledge transfer**: Co-programming fosters mutual learning between public authorities and civil society. This process enhances the skills of all actors and improves the institutional capacity to address diverse needs.

- **Democratic legitimacy and accountability**: Policies co-created with citizens and CSOs are more democratically legitimate. They reflect collective will and can be more easily defended and supported, both politically and socially.

In sum, co-programming strengthens the social contract between institutions and citizens. It is not merely a governance method, but a pathway to a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society.

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4. Key Tools for Facilitating Co-Programming

Public authorities can utilize a variety of tools to enhance co-programming. These include:

- **Participatory Needs Assessment Tools** (e.g., focus groups, community mapping, surveys, participatory budgeting)

- **Stakeholder Engagement Platforms** (e.g., CitizenLab, Decidim, multi-stakeholder workshops)

- **Co-Design and Co-Creation Workshops** (e.g., Design Thinking, Theory of Change, World Café)

- **Institutional Frameworks and Agreements** (e.g., Memoranda of Understanding)

- **Legal and Regulatory Instruments** (e.g., consultation mandates, public procurement clauses)

- **Communication and Transparency Tools** (e.g., dashboards, open data, feedback systems)

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5. Steps to Implementing Co-Programming Mechanisms

1. **Internal Assessment**
2. **Stakeholder Mapping**
3. **Design the Co-Programming Process**
4. **Launch the Participatory Process**
5. **Develop Joint Action Plans**
6. **Monitor and Evaluate**

7. **Institutionalize the Practice**

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6. Practical Examples and Case Studies

Case Study 1: Participatory Budgeting in Bologna, Italy

The Municipality of Bologna implemented participatory budgeting to involve citizens and CSOs in allocating part of the city budget. Neighborhood assemblies allowed residents to propose and vote on projects. Special measures like multilingual materials, childcare during meetings, and NGO facilitators enabled participation by migrant families and young mothers. Several projects were approved around early education, women's health, and migrant support.

Case Study 2: Decidim Platform in Barcelona, Spain

Barcelona's City Council used Decidim, an open-source digital platform, to enable participatory co-programming. Migrant communities were included via translated materials, digital training, and NGO partnerships. One result was the redevelopment of a public space with safe zones for women and inclusive child-friendly areas based on input from migrant mothers.

Case Study 3: Co-Design of Early Childhood Services in Sweden

Swedish municipalities launched co-design initiatives with migrant mothers to improve early childhood services. Through storytelling workshops, home visits, and bilingual forums, women identified barriers and proposed solutions. Outputs included multicultural health classes, translated materials, and co-run parent-child playgroups. Data showed increased access and trust in services.

Case Study 4: Citizen Participation in Ghent, Belgium

The City of Ghent created a citizen participation unit that regularly co-programs services with local CSOs. One project helped integrate single migrant mothers into the workforce through joint policy labs, NGO mapping of skills, and pilot job placements. The result: a tailored employment support program shaped by co-designed insight.

Case Study 5: "Voices of Mothers" in Berlin, Germany

In Berlin, a municipal office and an NGO launched the "Voices of Mothers" initiative, using photovoice and storytelling to highlight migrant women's challenges. Insights fed into the city's social inclusion action plan, improved communication practices, and trained civil servants on cultural competence.

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