

Discovering public value in local government: A framework for assessing and comparing labor participation policies for disabled people across different municipalities

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Abstract

The concept of public value has gained popularity among scholars and practitioners of public management, but both groups are still struggling with assessing public value creation in practice. The literature has made some advances in assessing the public value creation of individual agencies and networks, but has largely ignored public value creation by comprehensive layers of governments such as municipalities. Moreover, there are very few tools available for comparing public creation across cases and contexts, making it difficult to identify broader lessons for public value management. This paper proposes a framework for assessing and comparing the public value creation of different local governments. The paper systematically extracts the key propositions of public value management from the latest literature and then draws implications for a comparative evaluation of municipalities. This approach generates a practical framework for assessing and comparing the work of local governments in a specific policy domain; the increase of labor market participation of people with disabilities. The framework shows how the emphasis on local customization and fit central to public value management can be combined with meaningful comparisons across public organizations.

Keywords

Public value management, local government, labor market policies, policy evaluation, measurement

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Introduction

The public value perspective has become increasingly popular among practitioners and scholars (see for example: Bryson et al., 2014; Williams and Shearer, 2011). In the Netherlands, municipalities also have become increasingly interested in evaluating their activities based on a public value perspective. The municipal interest in public value management is for example reflected in the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) investing in a Public Value research program. In this program 'Successful Local Governance' is studied in a comparative approach. A central aim is to formulate lessons for municipalities on how to increase their public value creation regarding three specific local tasks: labor market integration of people with disabilities, housing and local democracy.

Despite the popularity of the public value perspective there is still too little clarity about the empirical assessment of public value (see for example: Douglas, 2016, Hartley et al., 2016, Meynhardt & Metelman, 2009,). Bryson et al. (2014, p. 453) for example state: "In order to make progress [...] scholars should address the challenges to current formulations, in part through further conceptual refinement, the development of suitable typologies and measures, and rigorous empirical testing". Moreover, the existing literature has focused on exploring public value creation by individual agencies and networks, but ignores public value creation by comprehensive layers of governments such as municipalities, and has provided little tools for comparing public value creation across cases and contexts.

This lack of conceptual clarity, empirical research and analytical tools poses a challenge for studying successful local governance from a public value perspective. Researchers have to invest greatly in designing their research to overcome these shortages. They themselves have to start developing a framework for assessing and comparing the public value creation of municipalities as they cannot rely on previous research. Because of this lack of tools for comparing public value creation across cases we will in this article develop a framework for assessing and comparing public value creation across different local governments. Our aim is to develop a framework which can realistically be executed by researchers (limiting time and resources), generates valid pronouncements to what extent value is created (not merely listing targets), and produces reliable results which are verifiable by other scholars.

The paper systematically explores key propositions of public value management and their implications for the assessment and comparison of public value creation at the local level. These insights are used to formulate a framework for assessing and comparing the performance of a specific local government task: the labor market participation of people with disabilities. This case provides a clear illustration of how the concept of public value can be used practically when looking at the success of municipalities. The framework shows how the emphasis on local customization and fit central to public value management can be combined with meaningful comparisons across public organizations. Standing only at the beginning of our research project, we do not position this framework as the definitive approach for assessing and comparing local public value creation, but rather as the summation of our current understanding explicitly inviting comments and suggestions from scholars and practitioners interested in the practice of public value creation.

The local challenge: labor market integration of disabled people

The ambition to provide illustrations of how the public value perspective can be used in practice makes it necessary to elaborate on the specific local government local task. Therefore we will start this paper by providing background information on the local challenge put central in this paper: to increase the labor market participation of disabled people.

What's the problem?

Worldwide too many disabled people are unemployed (ILO, 2013). Schriener (2001, p. 644-645) states that: "No matter whether they live in the most prosperous nations of the world or the least, people with disabilities are among the most economically disadvantaged groups in society. [...] People with disabilities are chronically underemployed and unemployed". Apparently it is hard for people with physical and/or mental disabilities to find a job. This labor market exclusion can be due to the physical or skill requirements of a job, but often stems from factors other than people's disabilities like the prejudices amongst employers and the failure of society to recognize the potential (see for example: Schriener, 2001). As a consequence, many disabled people are unemployed against their will. In the Netherlands, for example, about a tenth of the 25-45 year olds have a disability affecting their capacity to work. While 87% of all 25-45 year olds participate in the labor market, only 42% of people with a disability have such access to jobs (CBS, 18 July 2016).

Labor market integration of disabled people as a local public value challenge

The labor market integration of disabled people is already for several decades an explicit governmental goal (Van der Torre & Fenger, 2014). Since the 1970s, the social inclusion of disabled people increasingly emerged as a societal and political issue (Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). Employment for disabled people is viewed as an important element to their social inclusion (Giddens, 1991; Barnes and Mercer, 2005).

The goal to increase the labor market integration of disabled people is expressed on various governmental levels. The Europe Union's 2020 strategy includes the ambitious aim to increase the labour participation rate of people with disabilities to be equivalent to 75 per cent of the participation rate for the total working-age population (aged 20–64). In its disability strategy the European Union (EU) has expressed the goal to "Improve the employment situation of People with Disabilities (PWD) through recognition of their right to work, including the opportunity to gain a living by work accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible" (Placencia Porreiro, 2012). Many national policies are also aimed at the inclusion of disabled people in the labour market. In the Netherlands this is also the case. Dutch national government wants to employ as many disabled people as possible in a 'regular' job.

Local governments play a key role in achieving labor market inclusion in many countries. In the Netherlands, they are the formal executers of the so-called Participation Law, which underpins government's role in this domain. Local governments are tasked with encouraging employers to employ disabled people and with actively providing sheltered work themselves. The municipalities have significant policy discretion in executing the Participation Law. The idea is that local governments are best positioned to build policies which work for the local labor market and specific needs of the local community.

Various policy programs are designed to facilitate the labour market integration of disabled people (Van der Torre & Fenger, 2014). For example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2003) reports four integration policy approaches: i) Legal framework for employment promotion; ii) Employer obligations; iii) Vocational rehabilitation and training; iv) Special employment programmes (subsidized employment, supported employment and sheltered employment). Bambra et al. (2005) presented a more specific classification of policy tools. They distinguish between five types of "welfare to work" strategies aimed at increasing the labour market participation of disabled people: i) Education, training and work placement; ii) Vocational advice and support services; iii) In-work benefits; iv) Incentives for employers (e.g. wage subsidies) and v) Improving physical accessibility

Beside the different levels of governmental involvement as discussed above there are of course also others actors involved in the development and implementation of work integration policies for disabled people (see Van der Torre, Fenger and van Twist, 2012). First, there are implementing organizations that translate policies into practice (Van der Torre & Fenger, 2014). Such organizations include for example Jobcentre Plus in the United Kingdom, the *UWV* in the Netherlands, and *Samhall* in Sweden. These organizations are concerned with the actual realization of jobs for disabled people. Second, there are employers who have to offer workplaces to disabled people. Their co-operation is crucial for the successful integration of disabled people into the labour market. Disabled people themselves are also an important actor. Even though the central idea is that paid and regular work enhances the well-being of disabled people, not all disabled people are initially enthusiastic about participating in the regular labour market (Bambra, Whitehead and Hamilton, 2005). A range of factors influence this lack of motivation, among them are the possibility of a decrease in income and psychological dimensions such as the fear of the unknown or the prospect of failure.

Public value management propositions and their implications

After having introduced the case of the labor market participation of disabled people and explaining the role of local governments in this issue we now turn to a systematical discussion of public value management's key propositions and their implications for the assessment and comparison of public value creation at the local level. These propositions are extracted by the authors from the latest public value management literature and provided with specific references to public value management literature. The key public value management propositions and their implications will be used to formulate a framework for assessing and comparing the performance of local government 'success' from a public value perspective. Table 1 already provides an overview of the key findings. In the following of this paper we further explain the five central proposition of public value management and their implications for the assessment and comparison of local governments.

Table 1. Propositions of public value management, with implications for assessing and comparing local policies

Central propositions of public value management	Implications for assessment and comparison of local government
1. The creation of public value is the key objective of government	1. Name the values at stake in the policy domain, using individual and collective, welfare and justice perspectives
2. Different contexts give rise to different definitions of public value	2. Survey how local stakeholders of different municipalities concretize and prioritize the value at stake in their context
3. The work of public managers form a focal point in the definition and the delivery of public value	3. Assess and compare the role of the key local public managers within the network of stakeholders
4. Different contexts demand different managerial tools and operational arrangements to deliver value	4. Assess tools and arrangements through the fit with local stakeholder preferences and local operational needs
5. Public value creation should be evaluated through the judgements and experiences of all stakeholders	5. Survey the different stakeholders involved to determine how they interpret and judge the local value creation

Proposition 1: The creation of public value is the key objective of government

Public value management is viewed as a new movement in public administration beyond Traditional Public Administration and the New Public Management (see for example: Bryson et al., 2014; Stoker, 2006). Characteristic for this new approach is the emphasis on *creating public value*. Public value management is concerned with a broad array of values while traditional public administration was mainly concerned with efficiency and New Public Management with efficiency and effectiveness (Bryson et al., 2014).

In Public Value Management the key objective of government and public administration is to “create public value in such a way that what the public most cares about is addressed effectively and what is good for the public is put in place” (Bryson et al., 2014, 446). Or simply said: the key objective of governments is to create public value (Moore, 1995).

This great emphasize on values makes it necessary to provide clarity about what ‘public values’ are. Especially because there is still uncertainty in literature and in practical applications on what public value is (Meynhardt et al., 2017). Contributing to this are the different theoretical approaches that can be distinguished in public value literature. A recent categorization of the major theoretical approaches comes from Bryson et al. (2014 and 2015; see also Meynhardt, 2017) who make a distinction between: (1) *Bozeman on public values* (e.g. Bozeman 2002, 2007), (2) *Moore on creating public value* (Alford, 2008; Moore, 1995, 2013) and (3) work on *Psychological Sources of Public Value* by Meynhardt. This article follows the literature of Moore on creating public value.

Moore has arguably not yet provided a definitive and clear conceptualization of what constitutes ‘public value’, even though it is a key concept in his books and articles (Meynhardt, 2017). What Moore did do is developing a Public Value Account in which the pursued values and its costs are schemed. This PVA marks that for Moore public value is a “net concept”: it is a function of the benefits created by public organizations and of the resources expended in generating those benefits (Alford & Hughes, 2008: 133). Moore (1995:29) said on this: “it is not enough to say that public managers create results that are valued; they must be able to show that the results obtained are worth the cost of private consumption and unrestrained liberty forgone to produce the desirable results. Only then can we be sure that some public value has been created”.

Besides the notion that public value is a net concept Moore we will two other clarifications on what public value is to Moore are worth mentioning. First, according Moore it is necessary to take both utilitarian and deontological aspects into account. Moore (2013: 57) states: “[...] Utilitarian values alone cannot guide the value they seek to produce and to reflect in the operations of their organizations. They also need to rely on deontological ideas about their own proper role, right relationships between government and citizens, and what makes a society not only good but just”. The value of particular governmental actions should be judged in terms of (1) whether it improves welfare or material well-being (utilitarian) and (2) in terms of whether they are just and fair (deontological)(see also: Geuijen et al., 2016). Second, Moore (2013) distinguishes between value judgements from an individual perspective or a collective perspective. The public value perspective is not only concerned with individual valuing but also with aggregate social outcomes) (see also: Geuijen et al., 2016). Table 2 shows a scheme that provides an overview of values at stake in specific governmental policies.

Table 2 Values at stake in governmental policies

	Welfare perspective	Fairness and justice perspective
Individual perspective	Client satisfaction	Fair treatment Individual rights vindicated
Collective perspective	Social outcomes	Just social relationships

Based on: Geuijen et al., (2016); De Jong, (2011)

Implication 1: Name the values at stake in the policy domain, using individual and collective, welfare and justice perspectives

According to proposition 1 public value creation is the key objective of governments. This implies that when comparing the success of local governments from a public value perspective a researcher has to focus on local *public value creation*. Research questions to be asked are:

- Which utilitarian and deontological values are created from an individual perspective?
- Which utilitarian and deontological values are created from a collective perspective?
- Which utilitarian and deontological costs are incurred from an individual perspective?
- Which utilitarian and deontological costs are incurred from a collective perspective?

Table 3 provides an illustration of values that can be at stake in policies aimed at the employment of disabled people. The nominated values are derived from the Explanatory Memorandum accompanying the Participation Act, Sheltered Work Act and Act on Social Insurances. It shows there can be a wide variety of values at stake. The values contain rights of disabled people (privacy protection, social benefits and sheltered employment), economic values (sufficient employees, economic independence, reduction in public spending) and social values (inclusive labor market).

Table 3. Examples of values at stake in policies aimed at the employment of disabled people

	Welfare perspective	Fairness and justice perspective
Individual level	Disabled people: economic and financial independence Employers: Potential labor force for sufficient employees (to solve the future shortage of employees) ...	Protect people's privacy Right of sheltered employment Fair treatment ...
Collective level	Reduction in public spending Inclusive labor market ...	Financial benefits only for those people for whom it is really <i>necessary</i> Obligation to not ask for governmental support in case it isn't necessary ...

Proposition 2: Different contexts give rise to different definitions of public value

A central claim in public value literature is that what is of value has to be determined in the specific context of each particular public domain, although there are important shared foundations as well. The differences between contexts do mean that the definition of the public problem and priorities will differ across time, place, policy domain, organizational task, and stakeholder's arena. As Alford & Hughes (2008, p. 133) emphasize after reviewing the overarching principles of public value management: "None of this suggests that there is an absolute, universally applicable standard of public value. [...] The particular circumstances in the social and natural environment with which the public manager deals. What is valuable tends to take shape in response to the problems, small or large, that arise [...] in that environment".

Just as the definition of the problem will vary between contexts, the priorities for the public will be different as well. As Moore (1995; 9-10): "Managerial success in the public sector [is] initiating and reshaping public sector enterprises in ways that increase their value to the public in both the short and the long run. [...] Sometimes this means increasing efficiency, effectiveness, or fairness in currently defined missions. Other times it means introducing programs that respond to a new political aspiration or meet a new need in the organization's task environment. Still other times it means recasting the mission of the organization and repositioning it in its political and task environment so that its old capabilities can be used more responsively and effectively."

However, the importance of local context does not mean that different instances of public value creation have no shared foundation. All public value initiatives pursue the realization of socially desired outcomes (Moore, 2014). Both theoretical and empirical exercises demonstrate that the same family of values keeps resurfacing when scholars or citizens define what these outcomes should be (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Andersen et al, 2012). Whether we define value through the matrix of De Jong (2011) shown above or through the Public Value Account of Moore (2013), key terms such as personal liberty, social justice, material welfare keep coming back in different guises. This suggests that there is a similar pattern of values at stake across contexts, although how exactly these values should be prioritized and concretized will differ between locales.

Implication 2: Differentiate assessments of value creation in line with local context

Public value creation is thus highly contextual. The specific circumstances of an organization determine what is valuable for a public organization to create. This proposition has two main implications for the assessment and comparison of public value creation at the local level. First, it validates researching public value creation at a local level. As judgements of what value should be created have to be made in response to particular circumstances it is necessary to choose a level of analysis that represents this. Studying public value creation on a local government level aligns with this necessity. From this follows the second implication that it is necessary to differentiate assessments of value creation in line with local context. The success of a local government depends on whether it contributes that the creation of the *specific* values desired by its environments. So when designing a study in which the 'success' of different municipalities is compared a first step should be to determine what public means in a specific municipality.

Therefore research questions that need to be answered are:

- What is the local context and local challenge?
- How are the different values at stake concretized by the local stakeholders?
- How are the different values at stake prioritized by the local stakeholders?

In the Netherlands the perception of the issue of the labor market inclusion of disabled people differs greatly between municipalities. For municipalities in relatively economic weak regions, like Oost-Groningen and Limburg, the inclusion of disabled people is strongly an economic issue. As there is little employment in these regions they are for the employment of disabled people highly dependent on the public sector. The debate in the public organizations is therefore relatively heavily focused on economic values: how do we make the inclusion of disabled people affordable? This points towards the classical dilemma between financial and social values: what do we want to and can we pay for integrating disabled people? In municipalities with stronger local economies the integration of disabled people is less focused on the finances.

Another debate that can be observed is on what type of work facilities should be provided to disabled people. Should it explicitly be *paid* work or are voluntary jobs also valuable enough? And what's the value of sheltered work compared to jobs at regular employers? (Van der Torre, 2016).

Proposition 3: The work of public managers form a focal point in the definition and the delivery of public value

Having established that the main purpose of government is to create public value, but that what constitutes value differs between contexts, the question is where we can start looking concretely for public value creation. The propositions previously discussed can remain vague without a specific focal point for the comparison between governments. We argue for focusing on the role of public managers as a relevant and useful perspective. Moore already argues that creating public value is the central activity of public managers, just as creating private value is the central activity of managers in the private sector (Moore, 1995). He explicitly charges public managers with addressing the ambiguity of value and the complexity of context. “[Public managers] are explorers commissioned by society to search for public value” (Moore, 1995: 299).

Public managers have a central role in defining and delivering value, but we argue that their work can only be understood in the interaction with their context. Public managers lack the legitimacy and insight to define what public value is. “Even if they could be sure today, they would have to doubt tomorrow, for by then the political aspirations and public needs that give point to their efforts might well have changed.” (Moore, 1995, p. 57). Their task is to ‘call a public into being’ by mobilizing different stakeholders and let them define and assess public value creation (Dewey, 1957). Similarly, public managers play a key role in delivering public value, but do not monopolize all operational processes. The delivery of desired outcomes may best be achieved through government departments, but could also be achieved through an interaction between public, private, and societal actors (Alford, 2014). Again, the role of the public manager is to engage different stakeholders and partners to jointly explore what could work best.

Although public managers are therefore a key actor in the creation of public value, and in our view of useful point of observation, they are not meant to be observed in isolation. An individualistic view on public value management can be criticized for over-emphasizing the role managers and undermining the democratic control of government (Rhodes and Wanna, 2007) and we therefore explicitly argue for observing public managers *within* their stakeholder environment. The worth of public managers can only be weighed in their ability to engage other actors in the authorizing and operational environment.

Implication 3: Assess and compare the role of the key local public managers within the network of stakeholders

From the proposition to choose the work of public managers as the focal point in studying local public value creation follows that assessments and comparisons should focus on the views and actions of local public managers. An important step is to determine who the relevant public managers are and how they do their job. Research questions that need to be added to the framework are:

- Who are the key public managers in the specific local context?
- What is their role in defining and delivering value in the specific local context?

The public manager in case of the labor integration of disabled people can for example be the director of the Department Work and Income. This person plays a key role in setting local policies on the employment of disabled people and has to justify the performances of its department towards local politics. They play a key role in orchestrating local public values. Therefore the Director Work and Income can be viewed as the central public manager as defined by Moore. When looking in practice for the Director Work and Income in all Dutch municipalities a wide variety of job titles and institutional embedding can be observed. Examples of alternative job titles are Director Social Domain (Enschede) or Director Participation and Societal Development (Leiden). In their institutional embedding there are differences in for example the relationship with the sheltered work company, the level of policy discretion, the level of executive responsibility and the portfolio of responsibilities.

Proposition 4: Different contexts demand different managerial tools and operational arrangements to deliver value

The next question is what public managers and their stakeholders should do to create value and how we can assess and compare the effort across contexts. Although often positioned as a counterargument of New Public Management and its private sector leanings (Benington & Moore, 2010), public value management is at heart agnostic about how a service is delivery. As Alford & Hughes (2008) summarize: “Public value pragmatism entails the recognition that different circumstances demand different managerial tools. Instead of assuming that there is one best way for everything, we summon the venerable tradition of contingency theory.” Having defined what value is to be achieved, stakeholders can opt for in-house production by government itself, create a separate executive agency, contract private sector enterprises, or opt for any other pure of mix type of service delivery (Alford & Hughes, 2008: 142).

This agnosticism towards executive methods is not without limits. Firstly, the chosen methods must be constantly adapted to the societal challenges and opportunities. “The world in which a public manager operates will change. [...] It is not enough, then, that managers simply maintain the continuity of their organizations, or even that the organizations become efficient in current tasks. It is also important that the enterprise be adaptable to new purposes and that it be innovative and experimental” (Moore, 1995; 55). This fit to operational context also means that sometimes public sector organization hand over task to private or societal actors. Importantly, between his 1995 and is 2013 books about public value, Moore switched from talking about organizational capacity focusing on the own agency, towards operational capacity focusing on all public, private, formal, and informal processes which help in the delivery of public value.

Secondly, the chosen operational arrangement also needs to be supported by the stakeholders. Sometimes the most efficient form of organization is not deemed legitimate or desirable by a

majority of the actors involved (Douglas & Noordegraaf, forthcoming). For example, the privatization of prison services or education is common practice in some countries, but politically unthinkable in other states. This again means that stakeholders must be involved in surveying the different operational arrangements available to harvest both their suggestion and gage their consent.

Implication 4: Assess tools and arrangements through the fit with local stakeholders preferences and local operational capacity

The fourth proposition focused on *how* public values should be created. A central claim was (again) that public managers should take the local context into account: different circumstances demand different managerial tools. The executive methods have to fit the societal challenges and opportunities and needs to be supported by the stakeholders. With stakeholders should be assessed whether the tools applied were appropriate for the local context. Table 4 shows four scenario’s on the successfulness of the executive methods. This brings us to the following set of research questions for our framework:

- What operational tools are used to deliver the public values?
- To what extent does the operational arrangement fit the operational local context? Does it utilize the capacity of society as a whole, including public and private actors?
- To what extent are the operational arrangements considered to be legitimate by the stakeholders involved? Are they supported by politicians, citizens, clients, businesses, etc.?

Table 4: Success of public managers actions related to contextual fit.

	Stakeholder fit (local support for managerial tools)	No stakeholder fit (local support for managerial tools)
Operational fit (resources)	Full success	Some operational successes, but limited by legitimacy failure
No operational fit (resources)	Some legitimacy successes, but limited by operational failure	Full failure

The concept of fit is proved to be important in the selection of managerial tools in the employment of disabled people (Van der Torre, 2016). A central debate in local employment policies is whether the jobs should be created in the public domain or in the private domain. The extent to which public managers should focus on the market for employing disabled people depends on the particular labor market situation of a municipality. Public managers in municipalities with little job opportunities in the market have a valid argument for choosing public solutions for employing disabled people, like sheltered workplaces. It could also be argued that ideological goals like sheltered work companies becoming unnecessary because regular employers will employ disabled people are not realistic in such a context.

Proposition 5: Public value creation should be evaluated through the judgements and experiences of all stakeholders

Having established what constitutes public value in a broad sense, how it can differ between contexts, and focusing on the work of public managers, we must find a way to practically assess and compare the value proposition of different localities. The importance of the perception of citizens

and the support of stakeholders in public value management means that we cannot resort to ranking different municipalities along key performance indicators. Assessing and comparing public value is not about the numbers, but about how different stakeholders value these numbers and other elements of the public initiative.

The stakeholders in the authorizing environment include a diverse set of actors. “The people who become the focus of political management vary greatly, depending on managers’ specific purposes at particular times. Sometimes managers concentrate on retaining the support of their immediate superiors; other times they aim to mobilize the productive capacity of millions of citizens” (Moore, 1995: 118). This total environment includes formal principals such as political representatives, elected executives, or national ministries, but also informal partners such as citizens, local business, and the media (Moore, 2013). It is the standing of the policy among all of these key constituents which determines whether a specific initiative can be deemed successful.

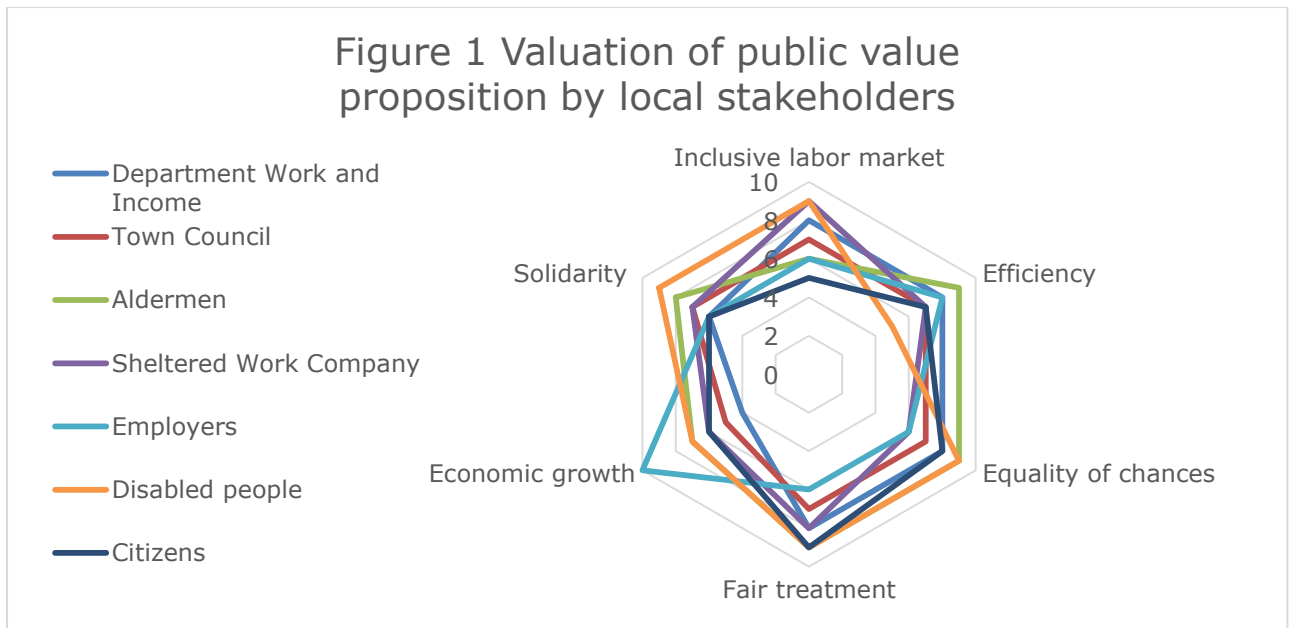
However, a key characteristic of a complete authorizing environment, is that it contains actors with differing interests, be it different political parties or employers versus employee associations. In an ideal situation, public managers achieve optimal satisfaction and support from all parties for the local definition and delivery of public value. Realistically, actors will remain divided over what is desirable and how successful the policy is. At the minimum, public managers should therefore achieve in continuously engaging the different actors which must be involved for legitimate and effective value creation. Negotiating their different contributions and viewpoints is key hallmark of success, meaning that strong relationships are a priority in themselves (O’Flynn, 2007).

Implication 5: Survey the different stakeholders involved to determine how they interpret and judge the local value creation

From this follows that for assessing and comparing the public value creation of local governments stakeholder perceptions should be taken into account. It is necessary to investigate how they value the public value proposition as proposed by the public manager. This points towards the following research questions for the framework:

- Who are in the authorizing environment of the public manager?
- What’s the public value proposition of the public managers and how is this public value proposition valued by its stakeholders?
- What alternative values should be created according to the stakeholders?

Concretely, this means that municipalities achieving the same public values can have different scores, or vice versa. If local stakeholders, including clients are satisfied with the outcomes, we must rate them quite successful. Figure 1 shows an illustration of the valuing of a specific set of public values by a selection of stakeholders. These values are examples of values that can be at stake in a municipality regarding the labour market inclusion of disabled people.



Discussion & conclusion

The aim of this paper was to develop a framework for assessing and comparing public value across contexts which can be realistically executed by researchers, generates valid pronouncements on local public value creation, and produces reliable results which are verifiable by other scholars. Specifically, we aimed to integrate the emphasis on local customization and fit central to public value management with meaningful comparisons across public organizations. Appendix A shows a summary of the framework we developed in this paper. Following we discuss whether the developed framework meets the formulated criteria of practicality, reliability, and validity. As stated before, we do not consider this framework the definitive tool for assessing and comparing local public value creation, but do feel it could start an important and useful discussion by scholars and practitioners about public value creation in practice.

Practicality

The practicality of the framework is concerned with the accessibility to data and the necessary time and resource investment for the researchers. We estimate that the *accessibility of data* will be no problem. The researchers have a large and strong network in local government which they could rely on. Also the involvement of the Dutch Association of Municipalities in the research can be viewed as an advantage. Another advantage for the accessibility of data is that the research isn't time consuming for the municipalities. This increases the collaboration of the municipalities. The stakeholders will only be interviewed for 1-1.5 hour. Besides the public managers is asked to deliver relevant policy documents, the contact information of the stakeholders and to introduce the study to the stakeholders to improve the cooperation of the stakeholders. The *time and resource investment* can be a challenge for the researchers. The emphasis of public value theory on the local context implies that it is necessary to define for each local government its specific public value proposition, its stakeholders, the managerial tools, etc. This requires in-depth research which is very time consuming and already a big research in itself, instead of only a case selection step. The necessity of collecting data on the local features also troubles using national performance data. National performance data put one public value proposition central in their evaluation while in practice local governments might aim at achieving social outcome related to alternative values.

Reliability

The reliability of this framework is concerned with the extent to which this tool would generate consistent results across different settings, even if it were used by other researchers. With this framework we are open and transparent about our theoretical assumptions and the questions we aim to answer. This makes it possible for other researchers to test and possibly even replicate our research. Naturally, there will still be the risks that much research in social sciences has to deal with. This has for example to do with whether we can trust all the subjective measures from different stakeholders. As Andersen & Hjortskov (2016) observed, citizens and other stakeholders are notoriously biased and predisposed in their opinions of government work. A risk can also be that the gathered views of stakeholders are disturbed by current events and therefore not representative for other moments. This risk can be reduced by asking respondents about their views based on a longitudinal perspective and therefore not focusing on a specific moment in time.

Validity

The key test of this framework is whether it generates an assessment of local public value which is both a valid description of the local situation and valid comparative framework for contrasting different municipalities. Considering the validity of the local customization, this framework incorporates specific questions that need to be answered to define specific local public value propositions, the local authorizing environment and its organizational capacity and how this is rated by its stakeholders. Considering the validity of comparison, we do draw on the wider literature of public value to ensure that stakeholders are talking about the same fundamental outcomes and reflect on a similar menu of different operational options for their local public value delivery.

We feel that this framework will not generate valid rankings of local governments based on who produces the most amount of public value. Such benchmarks would be counter to most of the propositions of public value management and not very useful to local governments facing more difficult circumstances than other. We do feel that this framework can generate valid pronouncements about which local governments are better able to read their local challenges, define what value means in their context, and find appropriate delivery mechanisms. Relative success in this framework is essentially not measured by net output, but contextual fit.

Again, we want to emphasize that we are still standing at the beginning of our research exercise. Together with scholars and practitioners we will start with assessing and comparing local labor policies as a first test drive of this model. Doubtlessly, this will lead to new insights and adjustments. Furthermore, we hope that this explication of how we view the propositions of public value management and the implications for local comparisons will generate more comments and suggestions from the reader.

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Appendix A: framework for assessing and comparing public value creation in municipalities

Research activity	Research questions to be answered	Municipality 1	Municipality 2	Municipality ...
Name the values at stake in the policy domain, using individual and collective, welfare and justice perspectives	Which utilitarian and deontological values are created from an individual perspective? Which utilitarian and deontological values are created from a collective perspective? Which utilitarian and deontological costs are incurred from an individual perspective? Which utilitarian and deontological costs are incurred from a collective perspective?			
Differentiate assessments of value creation in line with local context	What is the local context and local challenge? How are the different values at stake concretized by the local stakeholders? How are the different values at stake prioritized by the local stakeholders?			
Assess and compare the role of the key local public managers within the network of stakeholders	Who are the key public managers in the specific local context? What is their role in defining and delivering value in the specific local context?			
Assess tools and arrangements through the fit with local stakeholder preferences and local operational capacity	What operational tools are used to deliver the public values? To what extent does the operational arrangement fit the operational local context? Does it utilize the capacity of society as a whole, including public and private actors? To what extent are the operational arrangements considered to be legitimate by the stakeholders involved? Are they supported by politicians, citizens, clients, businesses, etc.?			
Survey the different stakeholders involved to determine how they interpret and judge the local value creation	Who are in the authorizing environment of the public manager? What's the public value proposition of the public managers and how is this public value proposition valued by its stakeholders? What alternative values should be created according to the stakeholders?			