Windows of Collaborative Opportunity: Considerations of Governance

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Given the complexity of many social, environmental, and economic problems facing communities, nonprofit organizations are increasingly collaborating with public authorities—but the power dynamics of such arrangements can be extremely complex and fraught with institutional interests, as representatives of the various collaborating parties shift over time with changing political and other realities. The literature on such collaborations often does not do justice to what this means for the governance and life cycles of these efforts. In this article, we propose a conceptual framework that seeks to explain the formation, governance, and life cycle of public–nonprofit collaborations.

As is noted by Melissa Stone and Jodi Sandfort, "research on nonprofit organizations does not fully consider how the policy environment shapes organizational operation and performance and shapes how actors act strategically to advance their organizational interests."[1] And, in 2006, David Renz suggested that, in fact, many governance decisions are made at a meta level—above the realm of any single nonprofit board—in the funding and policy environments.[2] Thus, Renz writes, understanding governance as merely board activity is shortsighted and limiting; he advocates a new focus on interorganizational governance processes that occur as organizations work together to address social problems.[3] Such collaborations can be relatively long or short term, and they ordinarily contain power dynamics that must be worked out. But when the collaboration mixes public and private organizations, other issues often emerge having to do with changing institutional interests and tenures. This leads us to consider what the factors are that lead to the formation of public–nonprofit partnerships, how they are governed, and the influences on their life cycle.

We base our observations here, in part, on a longitudinal case study of a public nonprofit collaboration in the United Kingdom. This partnership was aimed at neighborhood regeneration in deprived areas of one United Kingdom city.[4] The head of the regeneration team, an employee of the city council, initiated the collaboration and acted as a key coordinator. The research examined the development of the collaboration from its inception, focusing particularly on an attempt by the team director to redesign its governance structure.

Defining Terms

Many terms have been used to describe configurations of organizations that voluntarily agree to collaborate. This is confusing and impedes conceptual clarity. We use the terms *collaboration* and *partnership* interchangeably to refer to a formalized, joint working arrangement between organizations that remain legally autonomous while engaging in ongoing, coordinated collective action to achieve outcomes that none of them could achieve on their own. When the number of participants exceeds two or three, *network* is also often used, and there is little definitional distinction made.

The term *governance* is even more elusive. It is rooted in a Latin word meaning to steer or give direction, but it is used in a number of different ways, both within and across disciplines and entities. In fact, one of the more useful ways of distinguishing between different usages involves the level of analysis at which the concept is applied.[5]

In this article, however, we focus exclusively on the interorganizational level, examining how collaborations between organizations are governed. Keith Provan and Patrick Kenis argue that the governance of networks is important for their effectiveness, although this topic has been neglected in research.[6] They state that a focus on governance involves the use of institutions and structures of authority and collaboration to allocate resources and to coordinate and control joint action across the network as a whole. Unlike organizations, networks must be governed without the benefit of hierarchy or ownership.[7]

Building on these definitions, we propose that the governance of collaborations entails the design and use of a structure and processes that enable actors to set the overall direction of the collaboration, and that coordinate and allocate resources for the collaboration as a whole and account for its activities.

The Challenge

Within organizations, governance structures and processes are shaped by legal and regulatory requirements. The governance of collaborations is more elusive, as they are often established without any clear legal form or body in charge, and the relationships between partners are subject to change.[8] Public collaborations are often highly dynamic and even chaotic, as they must respond to complex and changing policy environments and deal with internal paradoxes and tensions.[9] The governance structures of collaborations are therefore more fluid than in organizational contexts, changing in response to internal and external drivers, as well as to participants' attempts to manage inherent tensions.[10]

A complex and changing national policy and economic environment can lead to changes in the opportunities for collaboration at the local level, changing the priorities of public partners, perhaps altering their commitment to the collaboration, and even leading to its decline or demise. Nonprofit organizations must remain aware of these potential dynamics and risks when engaging in public–nonprofit collaborations.

To provide a framework to better understand the formation and life cycle of public–nonprofit collaborations, we tested and refined an existing conceptual model developed by Douglas Lober, Lois Takahashi, and Gayla Smutny.[11] They extend John Kingdon's seminal work, which explains the formation of public policies in terms of the opening up of policy windows and the actions of policy entrepreneurs.[12] These windows are assumed to both open and, after a while, close, so the framework assumes a temporal dimension. Lober, Takahashi, and Smutny argue that the formation of collaborations can be similarly explained in terms of opening up collaborative windows that can be exploited by collaborative entrepreneurs. Takahashi and Smutny extend the model further to explain the short-lived nature of many collaborations. They suggest that "initial governance structures emanating from particular collaborative windows and entrepreneurs limit their adaptability and portend their short-term demise."[13]

Collaborative Windows, Collaborative Entrepreneurs, and the Formation of Collaborations

To explain how policy windows are formed, Kingdon proposes that three largely independent, temporal streams run through the political system: a *problem stream*, a *policy* (or *solution*) *stream*, and a *political stream*. The problem stream consists of issues or situations that interest groups identify as "problems" to be addressed. The policy/solution stream consists of policy proposals advocated by various groups to address the problems. The political stream consists of various influences on the political system (e.g., public opinion, the media, and elections).[14]

Kingdon argues that whenever these different streams converge, a "policy window" opens, presenting an opportunity to adopt new policies. For this to happen, however, policy entrepreneurs (either individuals or groups) must recognize that the window has opened and have the skills to exploit the opportunity and gain support for their proposals.[15]

In trying to understand the formation of collaborations, Lober adds a fourth stream—the *organizational stream*—that encompasses changes in organizational and industry behavior regarding the issues being addressed. He also suggests the political stream needs to be broadened to include social and economic factors affecting the issues to be addressed (hereafter called the *PSE stream*). According to Lober, convergence in these four streams can create the conditions for forming a collaboration (i.e., a collaborative window rather than a policy window).[16] For this to happen, however, the opportunity must be exploited by collaborative entrepreneurs. For Lober, as well as for Takahashi and Smutny, the collaborative entrepreneur resembles the policy entrepreneur. Collaborative entrepreneurs act as the catalyst for forming collaborations by working across organizational boundaries to join organizations and identify solutions to problems.

The neighborhood regeneration partnership we observed was formed in 2009. The problem stream was that both national and local governments in the United Kingdom had long recognized some neighborhoods suffer multiple deprivations. In 2008, the city council's neighborhood regeneration strategy recognized these deprived areas were growing in scale and intensity. The PSE stream contained several strands favorable to neighborhood regeneration, including an existing national strategy for neighborhood renewal, which emphasized the role of local public authorities in tackling deprivation, and a growing public awareness of the negative impacts of increasing inequality. The

policy/solution stream within the city council was influenced by various complementary policies, for example, a sustainable communities strategy that emphasized the need to tackle problem areas in the city. The organizational stream consisted of a wide range of public and nonprofit organizations that operated in the various deprived neighborhoods across the city. The city council's head of regeneration acted as the collaborative entrepreneur, mobilizing contacts across various public bodies, nonprofit and community organizations, and generating new resources to bring organizations together to tackle the problem.

The neighborhood regeneration program was launched with a three-tier governance structure consisting of neighborhood steering groups, to lead change in each of the deprived areas; a performance group, consisting of representatives from various partner organizations and heads of relevant services in the council to provide overall direction and monitor the performance of work in the neighborhoods; and a sponsor group, consisting of senior executives from relevant public bodies, businesses, and nonprofits to provide strategic challenge and accountability.

Governance Arrangements and Life Cycle of Collaborations

Takahashi and Smutny extend Lober's model beyond the formation stage to include the operational stage of collaborations. They argue that collaborative entrepreneurs "initiate alliances among . . . partners using specific initial governance structures that fit with the participants and the features of the collaborative window."[17] They further suggest that this initial governance structure seriously constrains the future adaptability and resilience of the partnership, because "organizational inertia and the time-consuming process of collaborative governance" make these structures resistant to change.[18] They suggest that collaborative entrepreneurs and other partners in the collaboration may not "have the skills to maintain, sustain, or adapt the collaborative partnership's initial governance structure to changing temporal and spatial conditions after the collaborative window closes."[19] They therefore propose that features of a collaboration's formation contain the seeds for its demise in a relatively short time, as initial governance structures fail to adapt. For nonprofit organizations and community groups, understanding what lies behind the dynamic nature of collaborations and their governance arrangements might

help them advance their goals when collaborating with more powerful public authorities.

Our research suggests that the model developed by Lober and extended by Takahashi and Smutny needs further refinement. First, our research suggests that the four streams comprising the collaborative window are not independent, as stated in the previous models, but interdependent. In particular, once the collaboration is formed, changes in the political, social, and economic stream may influence both the solution and organizational streams. For example, the regeneration partnership was affected by several important changes in the collaborative window that occurred in the period of 2009 through 2012. The global financial crisis of 2008 led to cuts in public expenditure, which in turn led to cuts in the budgets of the council and other public bodies involved in the partnership. This impacted the organizational stream as it led to cuts in the regeneration team and the resources available for neighborhood regeneration and a decline in the commitment of some of the other public partners. The government also relaxed some restrictions on local councils, allowing them to resume building public housing. This impacted the policy/solution stream as efforts of the council's regeneration team began to focus more on a major public–private partnership to redevelop one of the deprived neighborhoods.

Second, the model is overly pessimistic about the ability of collaborations to change their governance structures. While changing the partnership's governance structure was not easy, changes did occur, often driven by internal tensions and challenges, arising from the different expectations and goals of participants and a tension between efficiency and inclusiveness. Particularly in the performance group, there were tensions over the purpose of the group, whether it was there to monitor the performance of the neighborhood steering groups and manage risk or to provide a forum to discuss problems and issues. The large size of the group also led to concerns over the efficiency and effectiveness of the group, with some particpants feeling it had just become a "talking shop." Eventually the group was allowed to wither away, and the council's regeneration team took over responsibility for coordinating the work across the neighborhoods.

While some neighborhood steering groups continued to be active, despite the decline in support from the regeneration team, the regeneration program was not

extended to new neighborhoods as originally planned. In or view, the changes in the four streams, which influenced the priorities and commitment of different partners to the collaboration and the resources available to achieve its plans, were more important to the collaboration's long-term future than were difficulties encountered in changing how it was governed.

In conclusion, we posit that collaborations of all kinds, but particularly public–nonprofit partnerships, need to be aware of how changes in the collaborative window are likely to affect the partnership and may lead to its decline. In addition, these collaborations are likely to face important internal tensions and emergent challenges that must be addressed by those who govern and manage the collaboration. Some of these tensions may appear as a battle between efficiency and inclusiveness, or may seem to be about goals and ways of working, but the truth is that they are part and parcel of the effort and not necessarily a sign of dysfunction. They do have to be managed skillfully, but they quite naturally can be expected to lead to changes in governance structures and processes. In the end, however, understanding that there are windows of opportunity for some collaborations will help nonprofit participants, in the cases where that is necessary, recalibrating and redeploying their efforts to greatest stead while not losing the potential of future collaborative windows and partners.

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[1] Melissa M. Stone and Jodi R. Sandfort argued for theory and research that take into account policy fields in the strategic actions of nonprofit organizations. One advantage of using and refining the model

developed by Lois Takahashi and Gayla Smutny to make this link is that it can then acknowledge the influence of changes in the politics, social, and economic streams (including relevant policies) on opportunities for collaboration. See Melissa M. Stone and Jodi R. Sandfort, "Building a Policy Fields Framework to Inform Research on Nonprofit Organizations," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38, no. 6 (December 2009): 1054–1075.

[2] David Renz, "Reframing Governance," *Nonprofit Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Winter, 2006): 6–11.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The name of the city where the research took place and the names of actors in the collaboration have not been revealed to protect anonymity.

[5] Jan Kooiman, "Social-Political Governance: Overview, reflections and design," *Public Management: An International Journal of Research and Theory* 1, no. 1 (March 1999): 67–92.

[6] Keith G. Provan and Patrick Kenis, "Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18, no. 2 (April 2008): 229–252.

[7] Ibid., 231–232.

[8] Melissa M. Stone, Barbara C. Crosby, and John M. Bryson, "Governing public–nonprofit collaborations: understanding their complexity and the implications for research," *Voluntary Sector Review* 1, no. 3 (November 2010): 309–334.

[9] Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen, "Ambiguity, Complexity and Dynamics in the Membership of Collaboration," *Human Relations* 53, no. 6 (June 2000): 771–806; Melissa M. Stone, Barbara C. Crosby, and John M. Bryson, "Adaptive Governance in Collaborations: Design Propositions from Research and Practice," in *Nonprofit Governance: Innovative Perspectives and Approaches,* ed. Chris Cornforth and William A. Brown (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 249–271; Provan and Kenis, "Modes of network governance"; and Angel Saz-Carranza and Sonia M. Ospina, "The Behavioral Dimension of Governing Interorganizational Goal-Directed Networks—Managing the Unity-Diversity Tension," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21, no. 1 (April 2011): 327–365.

[10] Stone, Crosby, and Bryson, "Governing public–nonprofit collaborations."

[11] Douglas J. Lober, "Explaining the formation of business-environmentalist collaborations: Collaborative windows and the Paper Task Force," *Policy Sciences* 30, no. 1 (February 1997): 1–24; and Lois M. Takahashi and Gayla Smutny, "Collaborative Windows and Organizational Governance: Exploring the Formation and Demise of Social Service Partnerships," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (June 2002): 165–185.

[12] John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1984).

[13] Takahashi and Smutny, "Collaborative Windows and Organizational Governance, 181.

[14] Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Lober, "Explaining the formation of business-environmentalist collaborations."

[17] Takahashi and Smutny, "Collaborative Windows and Organizational Governance," 169.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.