Assessing the Impact of Collaborative Governance on Public Policy Outcomes: A Comparative Analysis of Case Studies

Professor Zamokuhle Mbandlwa
Department of Public Administration and Economics,
The Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.
ZamokuhleM@dut.ac.za, 21240964@dut4life.ac.za
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7528-3565

Abstract

Background: Collaborative governance has emerged as a prominent paradigm in public administration, emphasizing cooperation and partnerships among diverse stakeholders to address complex public issues. Within this research tradition, the concept of "horizontal ethos" has gained attention for its potential to foster innovative, democratic, and efficient solutions. This study examines the horizontal ethos of collaborative governance on the international scene, delving into its conceptual foundations and practical manifestations.

Objectives: This research aims to shed light on the horizontal ethos within the collaborative governance research tradition in public administration on an international scale. Specifically, it seeks to:

• Define and conceptualize the horizontal ethos within the context of collaborative governance.
• Identify the key factors that promote or hinder the adoption of a horizontal ethos.
• Explore the impact of a horizontal ethos on the effectiveness and sustainability of collaborative governance initiatives.

Qualitative Research Methodology: This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining document analysis, and content analysis of international case studies. A diverse set of key informants documents, including government officials, non-governmental organizations, and scholars, to gain insights into their perspectives on the horizontal ethos. The case studies span various countries, allowing for a comparative analysis of collaborative governance practices.

Findings: The analysis reveals several key findings:

The horizontal ethos in collaborative governance is characterized by principles of inclusivity, shared leadership, trust, and reciprocity. It underscores the importance of breaking down hierarchical boundaries and promoting equal participation among stakeholders. The adoption of a horizontal ethos is influenced by cultural, institutional, and contextual factors. Cultural norms, legal frameworks, and the willingness of stakeholders to embrace a horizontal approach significantly impact its implementation.

Conclusion: This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the horizontal ethos within the collaborative governance research tradition. It underscores the significance of promoting a horizontal ethos for addressing global challenges effectively. By considering cultural, institutional, and contextual factors, policymakers and practitioners can design collaborative governance initiatives that harness the power of the horizontal ethos to foster more inclusive, participatory, and efficient solutions to complex public issues on an international scale.

Keywords: Collaborative Governance, Horizontal Ethos, International Public Administration, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainability in Governance

Introduction

Earlier approaches to regional planning concentrated mainly on restructuring governmental systems to solve problems related to public service delivery. More recent approaches, however, focus less on formal structural change and more on building cooperative relationships among neighbouring governments and diverse stakeholders. These partnerships aim to address complex regional challenges that extend beyond political borders and social, economic, racial, or geographic divisions. As a result, cross-boundary planning and problem-solving require local governments to develop new skills and capacities to engage effectively in collaborative governance.Ultimately, the success of regional plans depends on sustained action at the local level, since implementation over time determines whether these initiatives succeed or fail. Across the United States, public officials and community stakeholders increasingly work beyond jurisdictional lines to tackle shared service delivery challenges and pursue common objectives. Although regional thinking is not new, its emphasis has shifted over time. One of the earliest examples dates back to 1909, when architect and planner Burnham (2024) created the Plan of Chicago, which extended planning considerations beyond city limits to encompass the surrounding region. This effort reflected an early twentieth-century approach that viewed regional planning as an outward expansion from a central city.The U.S. also has a long tradition of achieving regional coordination through annexation or boundary expansion, often motivated by anticipated population growth and increased tax revenue. For instance, Sugar Land, Texas, expanded significantly between 1991 and 2006 by annexing surrounding areas, contributing to broader metropolitan development in the Houston region (Nabatchi and Emerson, 2021).Another strategy historically used to address regional challenges and collaborative governance, such as fragmented governance, has been the consolidation of local governments. A notable example is the 1970 merger of Indianapolis and Marion County into a single governmental entity known as UniGov. Despite such examples, relatively few consolidations have occurred nationwide, largely because of the political complexity and effort required to implement them. These structural reforms are often described as part of "old regionalism," which contrasts with newer approaches that emphasize voluntary cooperation around shared regional interests, such as tax-base sharing arrangements in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area.The rise of regional collaboration reflects the growing complexity of contemporary challenges, which transcend jurisdictional and demographic boundaries. Local governments face pressures from economic downturns, shifting population patterns, shrinking tax bases, reduced federal support, increased service demands, and the expansion of metropolitan regions with fragmented governance systems. These conditions, combined with motivations such as cost efficiency and improved outcomes, drive the need for cross-jurisdictional cooperation (Ulibarri et al., 2020).

Participants in regional and interorganizational networks vary depending on the issue being addressed. Common contributors include local governments, business groups, development organizations, utilities, special districts, community associations, nonprofit foundations, and private-sector representatives. This approach to policymaking and management bringing together actors across public, private, and civic sectors to accomplish goals that could not be achieved independently is broadly referred to as collaborative governance.

As collaboration becomes more common, local governments face new challenges, since the skills required to manage partnerships differ significantly from those needed to run a single organization. To support collaborative decision-making, partners needs to develop a Collaborative Services Decision Matrix. This evidence-based tool will help stakeholders to assess necessary assets, costs, management capacity, administrative stability, and community conditions that may influence outcomes. It will also encourage discussion of both tangible and intangible costs and benefits, while fostering trust and problem-solving capacity among partners (Avoyan, 2023).

Similarly, guidance from organizations such as the National League of Cities emphasizes that regional collaboration can promote efficiency, improve service delivery, advance equity, and address large-scale regional issues. Leaders are advised to pursue regional approaches when economies of scale exist, when service impacts cross borders, or when coordination among jurisdictions is essential. These resources outline a range of collaboration models that vary in complexity and difficulty of implementation (Tomo et al., 2020).

Assessing the success of collaborative governance remains challenging. While positive examples are frequently cited, failures are less often documented. Existing research tends to focus more on the collaborative process than on measurable outcomes. Some studies suggest that

cost savings from intermunicipal cooperation occur in specific services, such as waste management, particularly for smaller municipalities. However, transaction costs tend to increase as the number of participants grows.

Broader analyses of collaborative governance emphasize the importance of initial conditions, institutional design, leadership, and the collaborative process itself. Overall, evidence suggests that successful collaboration requires time, trust, and interdependence among participants. Although collaborative processes are complex and fragile, they can generate public value not only as a means to an end, but also as an outcome in their own right. As research and practical experience with regional collaboration continue to expand, clearer guidance will emerge on when collaboration is most effective and how its costs and benefits should be evaluated under different local conditions (Bell and Scott, 2020).

Research Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) played a central and foundational role in this study. This has assisted in establishing the conceptual and theoretical framework. The SLR is first used to map existing theories and concepts related to collaborative governance and public policy outcomes. Through a transparent and replicable search of academic databases such as peer-reviewed journals, books, and policy reports. In this study, the systematic literature review functions as more than just background reading. It anchors the theoretical framework, shapes the research design, guides case selection, informs analysis, and supports interpretation of results. By integrating the SLR with comparative case studies, the research achieves both breadth (through synthesis of existing knowledge) and depth (through detailed empirical analysis), strengthening its overall contribution to the study of collaborative governance and public policy outcomes (Lame, 2019).

The research methodology of this study typically framed around specific review questions such as: How has collaborative governance been defined and operationalized in public policy studies? What methods and indicators are used to measure public policy outcomes in collaborative governance research? What evidence exists on the relationship between collaborative governance processes and policy outcomes? What contextual factors influence the effectiveness of collaborative governance?

To ensure relevance and rigor, studies are screened according to the focus of the study. The reviewed studies were based on as empirical studies assessing collaboration and outcomes. Comparative case studies or evaluations. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, dissertations. Publications in English. Some studies were excluded because they were opinion pieces and non-empirical essays. Studies focused solely on process without outcomes were excluded. Publications outside the date range when collaborative governance became prominent were excluded (Ritterbusch and Teichmann, 2023).

Literature Review

Public administrators are operating in an increasingly difficult environment marked by declining public confidence, organizational burnout, and social challenges too complex for single-agency solutions.

There is a Collaborative Governance Trust Model (CGTM), which rests on three central foundations reliability, transparency, and mutual respect as the basis for effective public collaboration. This instalment moves the conversation forward by examining how institutions can assess these elements over time, evaluate how trust influences results, and adapt the model to different organizational contexts. It also underscores the importance of shared power and accountability, which, although not defined as core pillars, are essential to maintaining fair and effective collaboration (Ansell and Gash, 2008).

Trust is never fixed. It strengthens, weakens, or shifts depending on behaviour and consistency over time. The CGTM treats trust as an evolving condition shaped by reliability, transparency, and mutual respect. Organizations can monitor these dimensions through a practical evaluation framework that links everyday practices to measurable outcomes. For example, reliability, honouring commitments, following through promptly, and consistently meeting agreed-upon expectations. Transparency, open communication, accessible information, and clearly articulated processes

Mutual respect actively engaging diverse perspectives, recognizing dignity, and respecting cultural and community contexts can help to strengthen the collaboration. Progress can be tracked using metrics such as turnaround times, consistency in service delivery, stakeholder surveys, and satisfaction with engagement processes. When integrated into continuous learning efforts, these evaluations help organizations identify weaknesses and adjust their approach accordingly. Building trust is intentional work, and it must translate into tangible outcomes. In areas such as homelessness policy, trust often determines whether well-designed initiatives succeed or stall (Siddiki, Kim and Leach, 2017).

Flexibility is a core strength of the model. In municipal government, it may support collaboration across departments. In nonprofit settings, it can help strengthen relationships with donors and clients. Faith-based organizations may use it to align outreach efforts with ethical and moral commitments. Although applications differ, the underlying trust components remain consistent across contexts.

Trust grounded in reliability, transparency, and mutual respect should be managed with the same seriousness as any other strategic resource. When institutions embed these principles into their daily operations and reinforce them through shared power and accountability, collaboration becomes substantive rather than symbolic. The result is governance that produces outcomes anchored in legitimacy, equity, and sustained public confidence.

Evaluating trust is not merely an internal exercise; it can also serve as a public signal of openness and responsibility. Sharing evaluation results through community meetings or accessible reports can help reconnect institutions with communities that feel disengaged or skeptical. Over time, these assessments also contribute to institutional memory, documenting lessons learned alongside successes (Gash, 2022).

Figure 1 below presents the integrated framework for collaborative governance regime which shows that public leaders must practice integrity and humility. Trustworthy institutions do not claim flawlessness; they show a commitment to learning, adaptation, and inclusion. In this sense, the Collaborative Governance Trust Model is more than a tool it represents a shift in mindset. It reframes governance as a shared process rooted in listening, partnership, and long-term public value. By treating trust as both a guiding principle and a measurable outcome, institutions create space for governance that is not only effective, but genuinely just.

**Figure 1: Integrated framework for collaborative governance regime.**
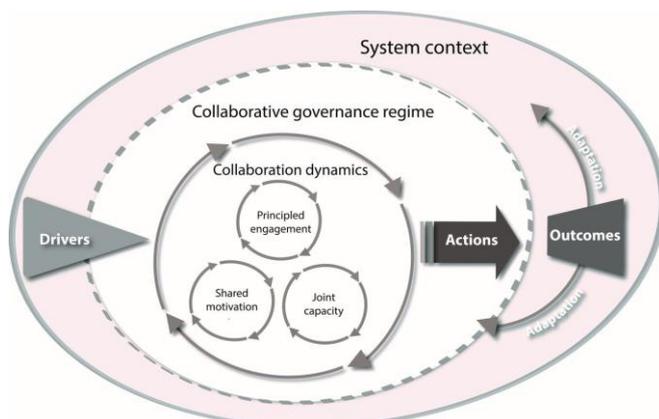
Source: Emerson and Nabatchi 2018

Governance is a broader concept than government and also includes the roles played by the community sector and the private sector in managing and planning countries, regions and cities. Collaborative governance involves the government, community and private sectors communicating with each other and working together to achieve more than any one sector could achieve on its own. Ansell and Gash (2008) have explored the conditions required for effective collaborative governance. They say the ultimate goal is to develop a contingency approach of collaboration that can highlight conditions under which collaborative governance will be more or less effective as an approach to policy making and public management. Collaborative governance covers both the informal and formal relationships in problem solving and decision-making. Conventional government policy processes can be embedded in wider policy processes by facilitating collaboration between the public, private and community sectors. Collaborative Governance requires three things, namely: support; leadership; and a forum. The support identifies the policy problem that needs to be fixed. The leadership gathers the sectors into a forum. Then, the members of the forum collaborate to develop policies, solutions and answers (Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh, 2012).

Over the past two decades new collaborative approaches to governing and managing have developed in a range of fields, including: urban and regional planning; public administration and law; natural resource management; and environmental management. Collaborative governance has emerged as a response to the failures of government policy implementation and to the high cost and politicization of regulation and as an alternative to managerialism and adversarial approaches.

Figure 2 below suggests that the field of public administration has changed its focus from bureaucracy to that of collaboration in the context of the network society. Public administrators have blurred the lines between the people, the private sector and the government. Although bureaucracies still remain, public administrators have begun to recognize that more can potentially be achieved by collaboration and networking. Collaboration and partnerships are nothing new in the political realm, however the wider use of this leadership style has gained

Figure 2: Collaborative governance model which depicts the process of collaborations among stakeholders.
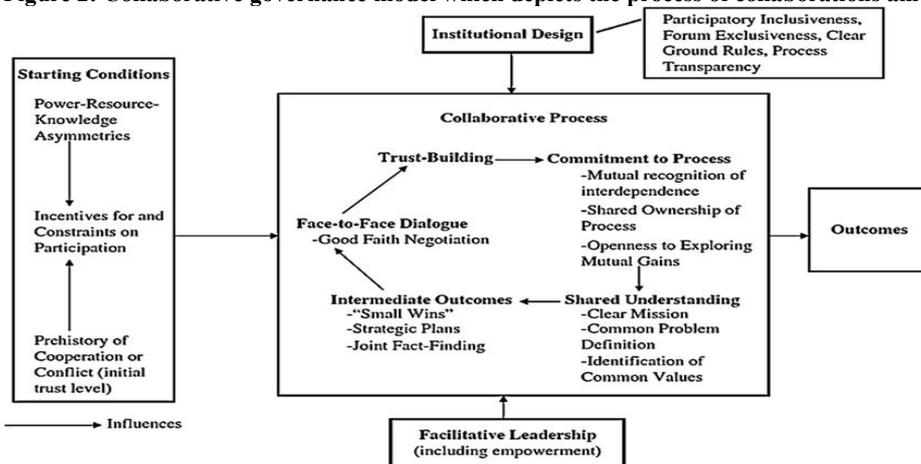
Source: Adapted from "Collaborative Governance in Theory and practice," by Ansell and Gash (2007).

Collaborative governance is sought when the management of a sector requires more technical, analytical, and/or financial power than is possessed by one party. Collaborative governance is often pursued as a solution to the principal-agent dilemma and the local knowledge problem. The principal-agent problem occurs when one person is responsible for making decisions on behalf of another; this can result in conflicts of interest and legitimacy problems. By including a full range of stakeholders, collaborative arrangements may mitigate this. The local knowledge problem refers to the distribution of specialised knowledge which means that a central decision-making authority does not have access to all the relevant knowledge to make an informed decision. Again, collaborative governance may help meet this challenge by bringing together those with local knowledge and sharing decision-making power (Liu, 2024).

Findings

Co-governance seeks to create mechanisms by which public input leads to actual changes. However, this requires moving beyond simply passive community "listening sessions" or town halls in which public officials hear the public's input without any associated or dedicated commitment to implement any of the public's recommendations. Those in power cannot view community engagement as simply a box they must check; instead of window dressing public participation, they must work on mechanisms for genuine participatory control by residents. Co-governance promotes a long-term vision, building momentum and relationships that outlast one-time policy wins. By building relationships that can outlast a specific issue, co-governance represents an ongoing democratic process rather than a one-off initiative. It can also highlight the value of "losing forward" in service of a longer-term vision. In brief, co-governance or collaborative governance creates positive feedback loops, which encourage and foster genuine respect and a shared understanding of power between government and civil society. Even in cases where policy wins aren't immediate, the relationships established can be impactful in the long run (Wang and Ran, 2023).

One challenge to engaging community residents in civic life beyond simply voting every two, three, four or five years is that there is no consensus about what a more robust, participatory model of democracy one in which people more actively participate in the civic fabric of their community looks like globally. The lack of any background agreement, or even common orientation, on even basic questions about public participation makes the job of those who champion participatory innovation much more difficult. There would be much more friction and unevenness in elections.

Collaborative governance refers to decision-making processes where governments work together with non-state actors such as businesses, civil society, communities, and international organizations to address complex public problems. It is especially important in environmental governance, where challenges like climate change, pollution, and resource depletion cross national and institutional boundaries (Lopes and Farias, 2022).

Using the figure 3 below, we can see collaborative governance as the starting point that sets several interconnected processes in motion. These innovations improve organizational and policy performance, meaning policies are implemented more efficiently and are better suited to local and global conditions. For instance, countries sharing best practices through international agreements often improve environmental outcomes faster than those acting alone. The figure shows that collaborative governance improves the availability of resources, which include: Globally, this can be seen in mechanisms like international climate finance, development aid, and technology transfer programs that help less-resourced countries improve their environmental performance.

Role of Environmental Law, at the bottom of the figure, Environmental Law interacts with performance, innovation, and resources. Laws and regulations:

Environmental Innovation Resistance, the figure also highlights Environmental Innovation Resistance, which can weaken progress. Resistance may come from economic interests, institutional inertia, political opposition, social or cultural barriers. Collaborative governance helps reduce this resistance by building trust, increasing stakeholder buy-in, encouraging dialogue and compromise. However, resistance can still directly affect environmental performance, as shown in the figure.

All paths in figure 3 converge on Environmental Performance, the ultimate goal. Strong environmental performance is achieved when: Collaborative governance is effective, globally, countries and regions that successfully integrate these elements through partnerships and shared governance tend to achieve better environmental outcomes.

The figure also illustrates that collaborative governance is not a single action but a system. Globally, it works by connecting governance structures with innovation, resources, performance, and legal frameworks, while managing resistance. When these elements reinforce each other, collaborative governance becomes a powerful tool for improving environmental performance worldwide (Newig et al., 2023).

Figure 3: collaborative governance benefits
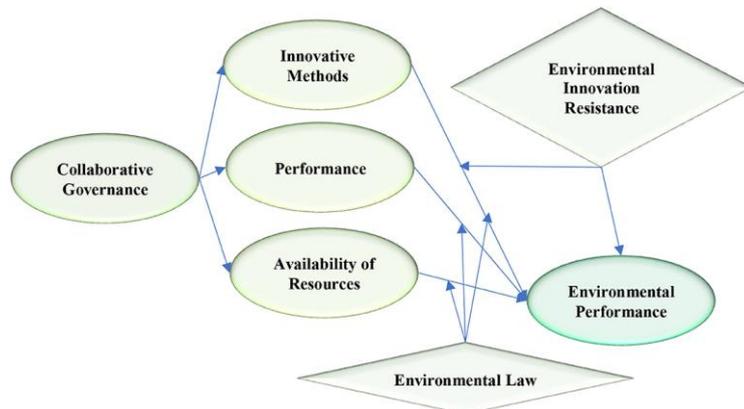
Source: Wei Sijing, 2022

Conclusion

This study set out to assess the impact of collaborative governance on public policy outcomes through a comparative analysis of international case studies, with particular emphasis on the role of a horizontal ethos. Drawing on a qualitative research design that combined systematic literature review, document analysis, and content analysis, the study provides important insights into how collaborative arrangements function across different institutional and cultural contexts and how they shape policy effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability.The findings demonstrate that collaborative governance is most effective when it is underpinned by a strong horizontal ethos characterized by inclusivity, shared leadership, trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect among stakeholders. Rather than relying on hierarchical authority or formal restructuring, successful collaborative initiatives prioritize relationship-building, voluntary cooperation, and the co-production of solutions. This approach is especially valuable in addressing complex, cross-boundary public problems that cannot be resolved by individual organizations or levels of government acting alone.The comparative analysis further reveals that the adoption and effectiveness of a horizontal ethos are not uniform across contexts. Cultural norms, institutional arrangements, legal frameworks, and historical patterns of intergovernmental relations significantly influence how collaboration is designed and practiced. In settings where trust, social capital, and prior collaborative experience are present, horizontal governance arrangements tend to produce more durable and innovative policy outcomes. Conversely, weak institutional capacity, unclear authority structures, and low stakeholder commitment can undermine collaborative efforts and increase transaction costs.Importantly, the study confirms that collaborative governance should not be viewed solely as a technical or managerial tool for improving efficiency. It also generates public value by enhancing democratic participation, strengthening interorganizational relationships, and building long-term problem-solving capacity. While measurable outcomes such as cost savings and service improvements may vary across cases and sectors, the process of collaboration itself contributes to legitimacy, learning, and resilience in public governance systems.In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on collaborative governance by highlighting the central importance of the horizontal ethos in shaping public policy outcomes. It underscores the need for policymakers and practitioners to move beyond structural reforms and instead invest in the relational, cultural, and institutional conditions that support effective collaboration. Future research would benefit from more systematic measurement of outcomes across policy sectors and from longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of collaborative governance. Overall, embracing a horizontal ethos offers a promising pathway for addressing contemporary public challenges in an increasingly interconnected and complex global governance environment.

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