

Sustaining Collaboration in the Public Sector: A Conceptual Discussion of Stakeholder Engagement and Compromise Dynamics

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Abstract

Public sector collaboration is widely recognised as essential for addressing complex societal problems, improving service delivery, and fostering innovation. Yet sustaining collaboration over time remains difficult because stakeholders differ in mandates, interests, power, and institutional positioning, while policy and governance environments continue to shift. This paper offers a conceptual discussion of how public sector collaboration can be sustained through evolving stakeholder engagement and compromise dynamics. Drawing on an integrative synthesis of collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement, and public value literature, the paper develops a stage-based conceptual framework consisting of four stages: initiation and stakeholder mobilisation; alignment and relationship building; operational coordination and adaptive adjustment; and renewal, institutionalisation, or decline. The framework highlights how stakeholder engagement changes across stages and how compromise functions as a central mechanism for maintaining alignment and collective action when conditions change. The paper contributes to collaborative governance scholarship by reframing sustainability as a dynamic achievement rather than a fixed outcome, by advancing a stage-sensitive understanding of stakeholder engagement, and by positioning compromise as a core governance mechanism in the durability of collaboration. The paper concludes with implications for public managers and directions for future research on adaptive and digitally mediated collaboration.

Keywords

Public sector collaboration; stakeholder engagement; collaborative governance; compromise dynamics; sustainability.

1. Introduction

Collaboration has become a central strategy in public governance because many contemporary policy problems are too complex, interdependent, and cross-cutting to be addressed effectively by single organisations acting alone. Collaborative arrangements are therefore valued for their ability to improve coordination, pool resources, stimulate learning, and support more inclusive forms of problem-solving. In public sector settings, collaboration is especially important where hierarchical and market-based forms of governance prove insufficient for responding to fragmented service systems and wicked policy challenges (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh, 2012; Osei-Kojo, Bawole & Sakyi, 2020). Despite these benefits, sustaining collaboration over time remains a persistent challenge. Collaborative arrangements are vulnerable to divergent stakeholder agendas, power asymmetries, accountability tensions, resource dependencies, and changing political or institutional conditions (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Osei-Kojo et al., 2020). More recent literature further shows that collaborative efforts are shaped by politicisation, evolving forms of agency, and institutional instability, which can either strengthen or undermine long-term collaboration depending on stakeholder alignment and governance context (Tuurnas, Paananen & Tynkkynen, 2023; Bazurli & Campomori, 2025; Weimer, 2025). These insights suggest that collaboration should not be understood as a stable institutional condition, but as an evolving process that requires continuous alignment, adjustment, and negotiation. A further limitation in the literature is that stakeholder engagement is often treated as a general requirement for collaboration rather than as a dynamic and staged process. In practice, stakeholders do not remain static participants. Their influence, expectations, commitment, and strategies shift as collaboration moves from initiation to implementation and possible renewal (Potthoff, 2023; Government Project Delivery, 2024). Relatedly, compromise is frequently implied in discussions of deliberation and consensus but is less often theorised explicitly as the mechanism through which collaboration survives disagreement, misalignment, and contextual change (Sørensen & Torfing, 2025; Weimer, 2025). This paper addresses these gaps by developing a stage-based conceptual framework for sustaining public sector collaboration. Drawing on an integrative synthesis of collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement, and public value literature, the paper argues that collaborative sustainability depends on phase-sensitive stakeholder engagement and recurring points of negotiated compromise. The paper makes three contributions. First, it reframes sustainability as a dynamic achievement rather than a fixed outcome. Second, it advances a stage-based understanding of stakeholder engagement. Third, it conceptualises compromise as a central governance mechanism through which collaboration is maintained, adapted, or renewed over time (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024; Weimer, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Collaborative governance and the sustainability challenge

Collaborative governance literature has consistently positioned collaboration as an important response to complex public problems that cannot be adequately addressed through hierarchical government action or market-based mechanisms alone (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). Collaborative arrangements are valued because they can improve coordination, pool resources and knowledge, strengthen responsiveness, and support collective problem-solving across institutional boundaries (Osei-Kojo et al., 2020). However, the literature also shows that sustaining collaboration is significantly more difficult than initiating it because collaborative arrangements operate in contexts characterised by institutional complexity, uneven power relations, contested priorities, and shifting political conditions (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Early work on collaborative governance identified enabling conditions such as trust, facilitative leadership, face-to-face dialogue, incentives to participate, and institutional design (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). While these insights remain foundational, later literature makes clear that such conditions are fragile and must be reproduced over time. Collaboration remains vulnerable when stakeholders' incentives diverge, roles become unclear, or governance arrangements fail to adapt to changing circumstances (Osei-Kojo et al., 2020; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). This suggests that collaborative sustainability is best understood not as a stable state achieved once and for all, but as an ongoing process of alignment and maintenance. Recent literature strengthens this process-oriented view by showing how collaboration is shaped by politicisation, different forms of agency, and variable institutional support. Tuurnas et al. (2023) show that collaboration between public organisations and third-sector actors reflects agile, institutionalised, and dependency-driven forms of agency. Bazurli and Campomori (2025) demonstrate that collaborative arrangements can be strengthened or weakened by politicised policy contexts. Weimer (2025) adds that collaboration may need to be deliberately constructed through institutional arrangements that facilitate exchange, trust-building, and incremental accommodation. Taken together, these insights suggest that sustainability depends not only on sound design at the outset, but also on the capacity of collaborative arrangements to adapt under pressure and maintain alignment across governance levels.

2.2 Stakeholder engagement as an evolving process

Stakeholders are central to collaborative governance because they provide legitimacy, implementation capacity, knowledge, and political support (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). However, stakeholder engagement should not be treated as a one-off act of inclusion or consultation. Stakeholders differ in salience, interests, contractual proximity, and orientation toward collaboration, and these characteristics often change over time (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Potthoff, 2023). In public sector collaboration, some actors hold formal authority, others possess legitimacy or urgency, and still others gain influence through strategic action, coalition building, communication, or control over resources (Frooman, 1999; Aaltonen, Jaakko & Tuomas, 2008). The dynamic character of stakeholder engagement can be further clarified by considering how stakeholders differ in salience, vested interests, contractual positioning, and attitude toward the collaborative initiative, as summarised in Table 1. The table provides a compact analytical lens for understanding why collaborative sustainability depends on managing a heterogeneous and shifting stakeholder landscape rather than assuming a fixed or uniform set of participants.

Table 1. Diverse stakeholder constellation and classification (Joseph & Sc 2014)

According to	Categories	Defining Characteristics
Stakeholder attributes	• Dormant • Discretionary • Demanding • Dominant • Dangerous • Dependent • Definite	• Power only • Legitimacy only • Urgency only • Power and Legitimacy • Power and Urgency • Legitimacy and Urgency • All three attributes
Stakeholder vested interest-impact index (viii)	• Active opposition • Passive opposition • Not committed • Passive support • Active support	• Pos = -1 • Pos = -0.5 • Pos = 0 • Pos = 0.5 • Pos = 1
Contractual relationship on the project	• Internal • External	• Having a contractual link with the project • Having no contract but could affect or be affected by the project
Attitudes towards the project	• Proponent • Neutral • Opponent	• In support of project • Indifferent • Against the project

Table 1 shows that collaborative sustainability depends on managing differences in salience, commitment, proximity, and stakeholder orientation over time. Actors may move from support to hesitation or opposition as implementation exposes trade-offs, while external stakeholders may shape legitimacy and operational conditions even when they are not formally embedded in the collaborative arrangement. The implication is that stakeholder engagement must be continuous and adaptive, with public managers monitoring shifts in influence, alignment, and support. In this context, compromise becomes especially important when stakeholder positions diverge and threaten collaborative continuity. A dynamic view of engagement is especially important because collaboration unfolds through phases. At the outset, stakeholder engagement is primarily concerned with inclusion, legitimacy, and shared problem definition. During alignment, engagement becomes more relational and strategic as stakeholders negotiate roles, expectations, and governance rules. During implementation, engagement shifts toward coordination, conflict management, and adaptive adjustment. In later stages, engagement becomes more evaluative and political as actors reconsider whether collaboration remains legitimate, useful, and publicly valuable (Potthoff, 2023; Government Project Delivery, 2024; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). A stage-sensitive account is therefore essential for understanding collaborative durability.

The literature also highlights that stakeholder salience is not fixed. Stakeholders may reposition themselves over time through direct or indirect withholding, coalition building, communication campaigns, credibility-building, or conflict escalation (Frooman, 1999; Aaltonen et al., 2008). This means that engagement is not simply about who is formally included, but also about how influence is negotiated, contested, and reconfigured as collaboration evolves. Public

managers therefore need to engage with a fluid stakeholder landscape rather than assume that initial stakeholder mapping will remain valid throughout the life of collaboration.

2.3 Compromise dynamics in sustained collaboration

Although collaboration is often associated with consensus-oriented governance, full agreement is rarely achieved or maintained in practice. Public sector collaboration typically involves actors with different institutional mandates, normative commitments, policy preferences, and resource dependencies. As a result, collaboration often continues not through complete consensus but through negotiated compromise (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sørensen & Torfing, 2025; Weimer, 2025). Compromise allows collective action to continue when stakeholders disagree over goals, responsibilities, resources, or acceptable trade-offs. Rather than representing a residual outcome after consensus fails, compromise is often the practical mechanism through which collaboration survives. At the same time, compromise should not be idealised. Some compromises preserve collaboration while still supporting public value, legitimacy, and service improvement; others may weaken accountability, marginalise less powerful actors, or reduce policy ambition (Skelcher, Mathur & Smith, 2005; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024). This makes public value an important normative anchor. A collaboration cannot be regarded as sustainable merely because it persists institutionally; it must also continue to generate socially meaningful and publicly legitimate outcomes (Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024; Strokosch & Osborne, 2024). Taken together, the literature points to a clear conceptual gap. Existing literature provides important insights into starting conditions, governance design, collaborative processes, stakeholder diversity, and public value, but gives less explicit attention to how collaboration is sustained over time through evolving stakeholder engagement and recurring compromise across stages. This is the gap addressed by the framework developed in this paper.

3. Conceptual Approach and Analytical Framing

This paper adopts a conceptual approach based on an integrative synthesis of literature rather than new empirical data. The aim is to clarify how insights from collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement, and public value literature can be brought together into a coherent analytical framework for understanding collaborative sustainability. This approach is appropriate because research on collaboration is often fragmented across disciplines and contexts, making conceptual integration valuable for theory development (Snyder, 2019; Jaakkola, 2020; Webster & Watson, 2002). Three concepts guide the analysis. Sustainability refers to the continued capacity of collaboration to function, adapt, and remain legitimate over time rather than to institutional endurance alone (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024). Stakeholder engagement is treated as a staged and evolving process shaped by shifts in salience, influence, commitment, and strategic behaviour (Potthoff, 2023; Frooman, 1999). Compromise is understood as a negotiated accommodation that allows collective action to continue despite persistent differences in values, priorities, or institutional mandates (Sørensen & Torfing, 2025; Weimer, 2025). Together, these concepts support a process-oriented understanding of collaboration as an achievement that must be continuously reproduced. The framework developed below is heuristic rather than prescriptive. It identifies recurring stages in collaborative processes and highlights the points at which engagement and compromise become especially important for durability. Its purpose is not to prescribe an ideal model of collaboration, but to offer an analytical lens for understanding how collaboration is maintained, recalibrated, or allowed to decline as contexts change (Jaakkola, 2020; Emerson et al., 2012).

4. A Stage-Based Conceptual Framework for Sustaining Collaboration

The framework distinguishes four broad stages in the life of public sector collaboration: (1) initiation and stakeholder mobilisation, (2) alignment and relationship building, (3) operational coordination and adaptive adjustment, and (4) renewal, institutionalisation, or decline. These stages should not be understood as strictly linear. Collaborative processes may move back and forth across them, return to earlier stages, or be interrupted by political, institutional, or resource shocks (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Nevertheless, the stages are analytically useful because each involves distinct engagement challenges, stakeholder configurations, and compromise points (Figure 1).

Across all stages, sustainability depends on the capacity to manage shifting relationships, absorb misalignment, and preserve public value (Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024; Potthoff, 2023).

Stage-Based Conceptual Framework for Sustaining Public Sector Collaboration

Stakeholder engagement evolves across stages; compromise points enable alignment, adaptation, and continuity.

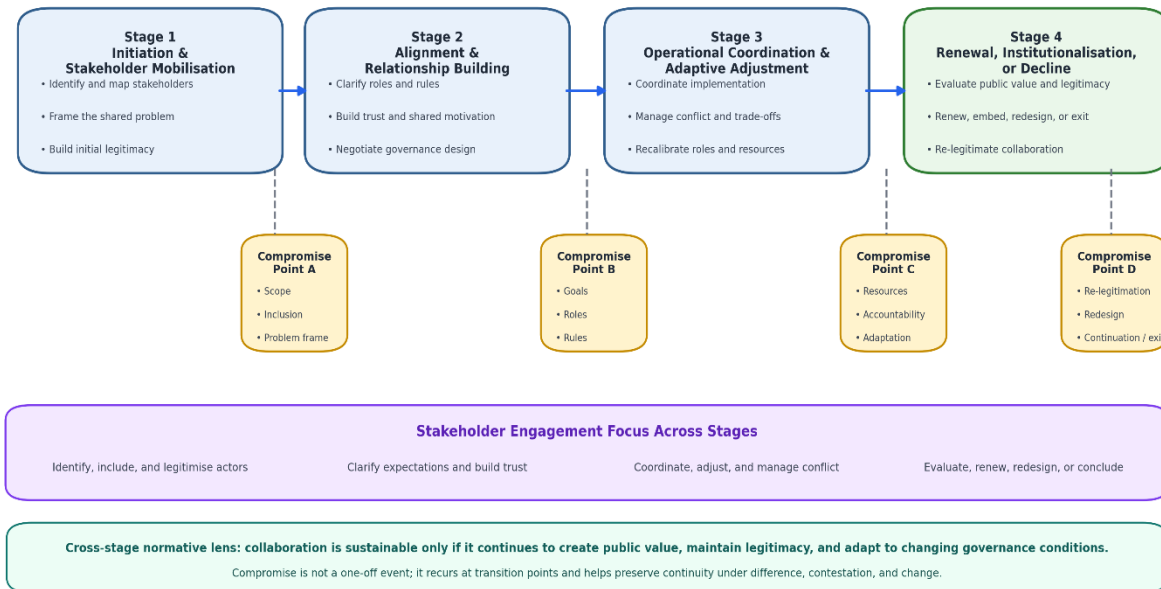


Figure 1. Stage-Based Conceptual framework for sustaining Public Sector Collaboration.

4.1 Stage 1: Initiation and stakeholder mobilisation

The first stage concerns the mobilisation of stakeholders around a shared policy problem or public value objective. At this point, the central task is to establish the legitimacy and feasibility of collaboration. Stakeholder engagement focuses on identifying relevant actors, recognising legitimacy claims, and creating a minimally shared understanding of the issue (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Potthoff, 2023). Because stakeholders differ in power, legitimacy, urgency, and proximity to the problem, mobilisation is not a neutral technical exercise but a political and relational process that shapes the future trajectory of collaboration (Mitchell et al., 1997; Skelcher et al., 2005). The main compromise points at this stage concern inclusion, scope, and problem definition. Stakeholders may agree that collaboration is desirable in principle while disagreeing on who should participate, how the issue should be framed, and what priorities should guide joint action (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sørensen & Torfing, 2025). Early compromises are therefore often procedural, involving provisional governance boundaries and temporary agreements that allow collaboration to begin even when substantive differences remain unresolved (Weimer, 2025). These compromises are necessary, but they may also carry latent tensions into later stages (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015).

4.2 Stage 2: Alignment and relationship building

Once collaboration has been initiated, attention shifts to building alignment, trust, and relational capacity. In this stage, stakeholders move from deciding whether to collaborate to negotiating how collaboration will function. This includes clarifying roles, establishing communication channels, defining decision rules, and creating governance arrangements that can support ongoing interaction (Emerson et al., 2012; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Engagement becomes more intensive and relational because stakeholders test each other's reliability, negotiate expectations, and seek workable forms of coordination (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Government Project Delivery, 2024). Compromise in this stage centres on goals, roles, authority, and governance rules. Stakeholders may need to accept less precise objectives, share decision-making authority, or operate within arrangements that unevenly distribute influence in order to maintain

momentum (Tuurnas et al., 2023; Sørensen & Torfing, 2025). These compromises are constitutive because they shape the actual working architecture of collaboration (Weimer, 2025). However, they also carry risks: compromise that is too shallow may leave actors weakly committed, while arrangements that are too rigid may reduce adaptability later (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Bazurli & Campomori, 2025).

4.3 Stage 3: Operational coordination and adaptive adjustment

The third stage begins when collaboration moves into implementation and operational coordination. This is often the most demanding phase because broad agreements must now be translated into concrete action across organisational and governance boundaries. Resource constraints, performance expectations, accountability tensions, and coordination burdens become more visible, and collaboration may face fatigue, conflict, or disengagement (Osei-Kojo et al., 2020; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Stakeholder engagement therefore becomes more practical and adaptive, focusing on information exchange, problem-solving, monitoring, and the recalibration of roles and responsibilities (Potthoff, 2023; Government Project Delivery, 2024). The key compromise points in this stage concern resources, accountability, sequencing, and adaptation. Stakeholders may need to renegotiate timelines, accept uneven workloads, tolerate imperfect coordination, or settle for incremental rather than transformative progress in order to preserve joint action (Weimer, 2025; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Compromise here is often recurrent and pragmatic rather than symbolic. It is embedded in day-to-day decisions about implementation, prioritisation, and risk distribution (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Sørensen & Torfing, 2025). This is also the stage at which the distinction between productive and unproductive compromise becomes especially important, since some accommodations protect public value while others preserve process at the expense of legitimacy or accountability (Skelcher et al., 2005; Virtanen & Jalonon, 2024).

4.4 Stage 4: Renewal, institutionalisation, or decline

The fourth stage concerns the long-term trajectory of collaboration once it has matured and encountered operational stress. At this point, a collaborative arrangement may become institutionalised, be strategically renewed, or decline. Sustainability depends on whether stakeholders continue to perceive the collaboration as legitimate, useful, and publicly valuable (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Virtanen & Jalonon, 2024). Engagement therefore becomes more reflective and political, as actors assess whether current arrangements remain fit for purpose, whether outcomes justify continued investment, and whether the collaboration should continue in its current form (Potthoff, 2023; Government Project Delivery, 2024). Compromise at this stage involves redesign, re-legitimation, and continuation under altered terms. Stakeholders may need to accept revised objectives, new governance structures, changed resource commitments, or a narrower but more sustainable scope of action (Weimer, 2025; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Importantly, decline should not automatically be treated as failure. In some circumstances, ending or transforming a collaborative arrangement may represent adaptive governance if public value can be pursued more effectively through other means (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Virtanen & Jalonon, 2024). This perspective avoids equating sustainability with permanence and instead ties it to continued relevance and legitimacy.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Theoretical contribution

The framework contributes to collaborative governance literature by reframing sustainability as a dynamic achievement rather than a static state. Traditional collaborative governance models have been valuable in identifying the conditions under which collaboration can begin, such as trust, leadership, institutional design, and incentives to participate (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). However, they are less explicit about how collaboration is maintained once stakeholders face the ongoing demands of implementation, adaptation, and political change. By foregrounding stage transitions, stakeholder shifts, and recurring compromise points, the framework offers a more process-sensitive account of collaborative durability (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Weimer, 2025). A second contribution lies in the treatment of stakeholder engagement as phase-sensitive and relationally dynamic. The framework shows that engagement needs differ across stages: legitimacy building, and inclusion are most important at initiation; trust, role negotiation, and institutional design become central during alignment; operational coordination dominates implementation; and evaluation, redesign, and re-legitimation are critical in later stages (Potthoff, 2023; Government Project Delivery, 2024). This staged understanding helps explain why a single engagement strategy is insufficient across the life of collaboration. A third contribution is the explicit positioning of compromise as a core governance mechanism. Rather than assuming that collaboration is sustained primarily through consensus, the framework acknowledges that pluralism, disagreement, and institutional diversity are enduring features of public governance. Collaboration often survives because actors negotiate workable accommodations that allow collective

action to continue despite unresolved differences (Sørensen & Torfing, 2025; Weimer, 2025). This makes compromise central to a realistic understanding of collaborative sustainability.

5.2. Practical implications for public management

The framework also has practical implications for public managers and policymakers. First, sustaining collaboration requires adaptive leadership that recognises stage transitions and responds to them with appropriate engagement strategies. Leaders should anticipate that the skills needed to convene stakeholders are not the same as those required to manage implementation pressures or renew collaboration after disruption (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Second, compromise should be treated as a governance capability rather than as a sign of failure. Public managers need institutional spaces in which disagreement can be negotiated productively and temporary settlements can be revisited as conditions change (Weimer, 2025; Sørensen & Torfing, 2025). This is especially important in public sector settings where collaboration involves actors with different mandates, resource dependencies, and accountability obligations. Finally, the framework underscores that collaboration should be assessed not only by whether it endures, but by whether it continues to produce public value. Public managers should therefore evaluate collaborative arrangements in terms of service quality, legitimacy, social responsiveness, and the continued relevance of stakeholder participation. A collaboration that persists but no longer contributes to these outcomes cannot be regarded as substantively sustainable (Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024; Strokosch & Osborne, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that sustaining collaboration in the public sector requires more than sound starting conditions or formal governance structures. It requires ongoing alignment work across time, shifting patterns of stakeholder engagement, and recurring acts of negotiated compromise. By synthesising insights from collaborative governance, stakeholder engagement, and public value literature, the paper developed a stage-based conceptual framework that explains how collaboration evolves through initiation, alignment, implementation, and renewal or decline (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Virtanen & Jalonen, 2024). The framework makes three central contributions. It reconceptualises sustainability as a dynamic and adaptive achievement; it advances a stage-sensitive understanding of stakeholder engagement; and it positions compromise as a core mechanism through which collaboration is preserved, recalibrated, or allowed to conclude under changing conditions (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Potthoff, 2023; Weimer, 2025). This process-oriented perspective offers a more realistic account of how collaboration persists in contexts marked by pluralism, institutional complexity, and political contestation. Future research could test and refine the framework through empirical work in specific policy fields, governance settings, or national contexts. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable in tracing how stage transitions and compromise points shape collaborative trajectories over time. Further work could also examine how digital governance tools and platform-based coordination influence stakeholder engagement and collaborative adaptation. Overall, the paper suggests that collaborative sustainability is not a matter of preserving equilibrium, but of continuously navigating difference in pursuit of publicly valuable outcomes.

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