Varieties of collaboration in public service delivery

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ABSTRACT

Collaboration – and its cognates consultative in-house service delivery, contracting out, commissioning, co-management, co-production, and third party certification – have in recent years been at the center of efforts to reform the public sector and devolve its capacity for policy implementation and service delivery. While the arguments in support of the use of different types of collaborative service delivery are plausible and the intentions motivating them laudable, the crucial questions to ask are: what kind of service delivery arrangement is “collaborative?” And, when could such an arrangement be used? Seeking answers to posed questions this article, and articles in the special issue it introduces, conceptualize and explore alternative arrangements in public service delivery by investigating them through governance lenses. After addressing the nature and collaborative potential for each type of service delivery, the article situates them in the model of capacity combining analytical, managerial, and political competences over three levels of governance activities. It shows that while the success of all collaborative arrangements for public service delivery is linked to political capacities, each arrangement involves a critical type of managerial or analytical capacity which serves as its principle vulnerability. The extent to which various collaborative arrangements can address these vulnerabilities is assessed along with their design requisites and potential utility.

1. Recent moves towards collaborative service delivery

Recent public sector reforms in many developed and developing countries have sought to reverse the excesses of privatization and deregulation during the 1980s and 1990s by introducing collaboration with non-market and non-state actors (Ramesh and Howlett 2006; Ansell and Gash 2008; Ramesh and Fritzen 2009; Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2017). Collaborative arrangements in public service delivery, it is claimed, induce the best of hierarchical, market, and network modes of governance by bringing together the key governance actors in constructive and inexpensive ways.
But how should such arrangements be put into practice? To what circumstances and issues can they be applied fruitfully and to which ones should they be avoided? Lost in the discussions of the alternative modes of collaboration has been the understanding of exactly (a) what kind of service delivery arrangement is “collaborative” and (b) when could such an arrangement be used. Articles in this special issue deal with these issues with reference to the several key service delivery arrangements featured in the literature on collaboration (see Table 1).

Aiming to advance the understanding of arrangements and conditions that are critical for their success, the special issue conceptualizes and explores collaborative service delivery by utilizing governance lens. It employs a governance perspective because the challenges of collaboration are, in essence, problems of coordination which lies at the heart of governance. In the following discussion, we explicate the concepts and categories relevant to understanding collaboration in delivery of public services.

(Rhodes 1997; Alford and O’Flynn 2012; Koffijberg, De Bruijn, and Priemus 2012).

| Arrangement                        | Common definition                                                                 | Collaborative potential                                                                 |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Consultative in-house service      | Direct provision of services by the public agencies but enhanced via participation and dialog with stakeholders, users, and the public | Might involve consensus-oriented decision making and lead to actual injection of citizens’ priorities in the design and delivery of public services |
| delivery                            |                                                                                   |                                                                                         |
| Contracting-out                    | Reduction of state involvement in the provision of public services through contractual arrangements with, usually, non-governmental organizations, primarily businesses | Might involve participation of multiple actors in negotiations over not just operational and price details, but also over basic service design issues |
| Commissioning                       | Public services are designed and delivered by business, civil society or public actors competing on an open market, while government agencies ensure strategic alignment of commissioned action with clients’ expectations and desired policy outcomes | Even though the engagement of non-governmental organizations and individual (or groups of) citizens in the co-management, commissioning and co-production of public service in practice might end up with competition, asymmetric dependence or even co-option, these three service delivery arrangements are ideal-typically based on collaboration. In their most intensive and advocated forms, co-management, commissioning and co-production are characterized by negotiative interaction and joint contribution of multiple stakeholders to provision of public services and their outcomes |
| Co-management                      | Civil society organizations are mandated with the production of public services and are doing it in partnership with other public and business organizations |                                                                                         |
| Co-production                      | In the interaction with employees of organizations that provide services, citizens actively contribute to service they personally receive | Relationship between business and civil society organizations involved in third party certification is essentially collaborative, as both actors are interdependently yet autonomously engaged in a joint production and enforcement of standards |
| Third party certification          | Civil society groups and firms (typically in sectors such as forestry, fisheries and agriculture) contribute to quality control by determining standards for goods and service delivery and by monitoring and enforcing, however loosely, production, distribution, and consumption activities |                                                                                         |
2. Collaboration from governance perspective

In its broadest sense, “governance” is a mode of coordinating governmental and societal efforts to address collective action problems (de Bruijn and ten Heuvelhof 1995; Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Kooiman 1993, 2000; Majone 1997; Rhodes 1997; Howlett and Ramesh 2016). Collaborative service delivery, in its core, is a specific mode of governance by which policies are implemented and services are delivered through interaction between two or more of state, market, and civil society actors. In the design and implementation of public policies, these three key governance actors interact with each other within inter-related spheres, generating various types of governance arrangements or ‘modes’ (Steurer 2013).

While governance arrangements can involve combination of different sets of actors with different core roles and strengths, certain types are more common than others. Legal or hierarchical modes of governance are one such type, featuring an emphasis on government control through regulation and rule of law. In this type of governance, nevertheless, in-house production of public services can be enhanced through dialog with stakeholders, users, and their associations. Market modes of governance are a second common type, in which quasi-governmental powers are ceded to market arrangements of voluntary exchange and the search for profit. Corporatist modes of governance occur when governments deploy both legal and market mechanisms. Network governance emerges where non-governmental actors and civil society members play a key role in service delivery. And finally, private modes of governance involve market and network mechanisms operating in areas such as certification and standard setting with the government playing only a peripheral role.

Each of the six types of collaboration in service delivery listed in Table 1 – Consultative in-house service delivery, Contracting-out, Commissioning, Co-management, Co-production, and Third party certification – exists at the nexus of these categories and features different combinations of government, civil society, and businesses interaction. In this interaction, in order to be collaborative one, actors are interdependently yet autonomously engaged in a joint creation of norms, “rules and structures governing their relationships and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together” (Thomson, Perry, and Miller 2007, 25).

3. Effective collaboration: political capacity a critical condition for success

The conceptualization of policy capacity as bundles of skills and resources necessary to perform policy functions (Howlett and Ramesh 2014, 2016) offers a useful model for understanding the conditions conducive for the success of different types of collaboration (see Table 2). The model highlights analytical skills (to define problems and formulate solutions), managerial skills (to effectively employ state resources for the achievement of policy objectives), and political skills (to generate and ensure support for effective policy design and execution).

The exercise of each type of capacity, however, to a large extent depends on the availability of resources or capabilities that exist at the different locations in political–societal relations. Resources available at the individual level involve capabilities that allow policymakers, managers, street level workers, and beneficiaries to engage as
individuals in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies (Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al. 2011; Howlett and Walker 2012). Resources that are available at the level of the organization include features of (inter)organizational relations and make up of policy-relevant organizations, which circumscribe their members’ capabilities to perform policy or governance-related activities. These include those related to information, management, and political support (Tiernan and Wanna 2006; Gleeson et al. 2011). Finally, system level capabilities include the level of support and trust a public agency or its private or civil society partners enjoy from political leaders and from the society at large (Blind 2006). Such factors are core determinants of organizational capabilities and thus of public managers’ capability to carry out their policy or governance-related tasks (Howlett and Ramesh 2014, 2016).

Based on the policy capacity model in Table 2, we argue that each collaborative service delivery arrangement requires some quantum of all three types of capacity if it is to be high functioning and match its theoretical optimal potential. The success of collaborative arrangements, however, is especially sensitive to the political competences that enable governments to mobilize resources and maneuver the meaningful contribution of non-governmental actors to the implementation process.

At the individual level, political competences that are essential for collaborative service delivery extend beyond officials’ leadership skills and involve their good judgment about when and how to bring in the interactivity in the service delivery process or even when and how to leave things to third parties. Such judgments, at the level of organizations, need to be complemented with the executive politicians’ designation of conditions and milestones that will frame the joint strive toward policy outcomes and with the empowerment of public managers for the facilitation of collaborative interaction (Jessop 2002; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Agranoff and McGuire 2004,

| Resource level | Skill dimension | Individual capabilities | Organizational capabilities | System capabilities |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Analytical competences | Policy analytical capacity | Domain knowledge and analytical skills as a base for effective negotiation and administration of contracts | Organizational information capacities | Knowledge system capacity |
| Managerial competences | Managerial expertise capacity | Motivation and ability of service providers to engage in creation of knowledge and quality in partnership with citizens and civil society | Administrative resource capacity | Accountability and responsibility system capacity |
| Political competences | Political acumen capacity | Required by all collaborative arrangements for public service | Framing conditions for joint action and empowering public managers to facilitate collaboration | Government enjoys legitimacy and societal trust |

Source: Authors own elaboration based on Howlett and Ramesh (2016), Wu et al. (2010), and Tiernan and Wanna (2006).
Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016). At the larger level, the nature of that government’s ability to ensure legitimacy and trust in its’ action on the part of stakeholders and the public is a critical component of all modes of collaboration’s operation and propensity to succeed or fail. Collaborative arrangements can only be effective if government is able to create meaningful opportunities for interaction and mobilize different actors to invest energy, resources, and knowledge in collaborative production of public services (Sørensen and Torfing 2016; Papadopoulos 2016).

While the success of all collaborative modes of service delivery is linked to political capacities, each collaborative arrangement has a need for certain critical analytical or managerial capability which, if missing, will stymie performance. That is, in the consultation mode, collaboration will only be effective if knowledge systems exist allowing intelligent input to be made into government regulatory and service delivery activity, for example. Whereas in co-production, as a mode of policy implementation and service delivery in which collaboration is primarily based on the inputs from (group of) individual citizens that are using the service, the success is highly dependent on managerial capacities. In order to ensure necessary levels of interactivity, employees of organizations mandated with the co-productive service provision need to find ways to engage in the creation of knowledge and quality together with citizens, networks, and communities (Brandsen and Honingh 2016).

Contracting-out, on the other hand, is about effective analysis and the behavior of individual analysts and policy workers. Even though contracting out involves reduction of the government’s involvement in the provision of goods and services, the effectiveness of contracts depends on administrators’ technical knowledge and ability to deal with complex quantitative economic and financial issues involved in regulating and steering the markets (Rayner et al. 2013). Commissioning also shares the need for effective analysis but is linked to the capability of existing agencies. By embedding classic procurement and contracting-out practices into the strategic considerations of most appropriate ways for meeting citizens’ needs and achieving policy outcomes, commissioning has placed pressure on public sector agencies and their ability to establish a plausible logic of intervention (Bovaird and Davies 2011; Taylor and Migone 2017).

The success of co-management is also significantly influenced by the resources available at the level of organizations but their ability to develop and promote organizational level capabilities lies more at the managerial dimension than the analytical. The managerial efforts in developing and maintaining partnerships between civil society, public, and business organizations can only succeed if is embedded in the trust, reciprocity, and social capital, which act as essential resources for inter-organizational communication and cooperation (Agranoff 2007; Klijn 2010; Osborne, McLaughlin, and Chew 2010; Hill and Hupe 2014). Finally, even though it features minimal government participation, certification still requires state regulation, transparent adjudicative system, and other system-level managerial competences in ensuring that community acceptance and legitimacy of third party certifiers is maintained. In this mode of collaboration, trust in the certifying organizations is a key to effectiveness (Bernstein and Cashore 2007). Certification only functions effectively if trust exists
between the public and certifiers and between the certifiers and certified companies and governments.

4. Lessons for practice: evaluate capacity needs and gaps accurately

Given that all collaborative arrangements are vulnerable to failures when governments reform or try to move from one mode to the other modes, practitioners need to understand not only the nature of the problem they are trying to address and the capacities they have at their disposal to address it, but especially the innate features of each potential service delivery arrangement and the capabilities and competences each requires in order to operate at a high level of performance (Howlett and Ramesh 2016).

If these critical capacity deficits are not taken into account or pathways through which they might distort performance of collaboration are not considered, then any short-term gain enjoyed by deploying a collaborative service delivery is likely to be cancelled out later when the consequences of policy failures and poor institutional design due to its governance limitations become apparent (Weaver 1986; Hood 2010; Howlett and Ramesh 2016). To suggest way out this dilemma this special issue not only addresses questions of when different arrangements might unfold as collaborative, but it also identifies ways in which specific government capabilities and competences can be bolstered or augmented when reforms are contemplated or implemented.

The first article of this special issue, written by Genevieve Fuji Johnson and Robert Howsam, explores the potential of consultations as a form of collaboration and ranks collaborative efforts on a Ladder of Forms (e.g. from on-line surveys, through advisory bodies and parliamentary committees, to participatory budgeting) and a Ladder of Ends (e.g. from policy education, through policy stability and policy improvement, to policy justice and legitimacy). Employing these two ladders, they argue that (1) consultation is only collaborative insofar as it takes an empowered form – that is, form characterized by a degree of decision-making power or, at least, power to directly influence decisions – and (2) the greater normative significance of the ends of consultation, the greater the importance of collaboration. In other words, if the end goal of consultation is the development of just and legitimate policy, then it is of greater importance that the consultation is empowered and thus collaborative.

In the second article, Dayashankar Maurya and M. Ramesh investigate conditions critical for the success of contracting-out arrangements. Based on analysis of the performance of health insurance contracts in India, they shed light on the importance of policy-analytical capacity. To effectively contract-out delivery of public services, they argue, public managers need to be able to negotiate and govern implementation of contracts so that parties to the contract have incentives to improve quality while reducing cost. To ensure that the contracting parties avoid perfunctory or predatory behavior, they furthermore argue that public managers need to be able to deploy governance measures which match the contract design.

The next article, by Andrea Migone, explores the opportunities that the commissioning arrangements offer to public managers and tackles the specific inputs and
conditions that support successful commissioning of public services. By looking at how the concept and practice of commissioning have changed the way in which public managers are approaching service delivery, he argues that the growth of commissioning is – at least in part – a response to the need for a more strategic, outcome-focused, and collaborative vision in the delivery of public services. For him, the realization of this vision requires specific support, especially with regard to outcomes-oriented approach which can be used to engage strategically the contracting space only by governmental organizations that operate an effective information and policy analysis system. At the same time, the success of commissioning highly depends on the ability of government to mobilize the stakeholders and provide them with the opportunity for meaningful interaction as well as on the analytical and managerial competencies of the commissioning team.

In the article devoted to co-management service delivery arrangements, Namrata Chindarkar, Yvonne Jie Chen, and Dennis Wichelns investigate the impact of contracting operations and water supply services performed by community based civil society organizations in rural India. They show how the repair times for handpumps used by lower caste households are significantly lower in villages served through co-management arrangements than in those served by private contractors, suggesting that collaboration of state with civil society organizations can bring about equity in access to water. While highlighting the summative importance of the efforts invested into development of analytical, managerial, and political capacities of the civil society actors engaged in collaborative service provision, they argue that co-management can be used as an innovative and effective arrangement for providing, managing, and expanding public services.

In the article focused on third party certification, Joanna Vince examines the key features and conditions of collaborative efforts between third party assessment and certification organizations, other non-state actors and the state. For her, this new hybrid form of governance raises questions about accountability and responsibilities. While highlighting the centrality of social license to operate and shareholder expectations for emerging private–social partnerships, she argues that a community’s lack of trust in industry and/or certification organizations hinders the collaborative process. Based on the examination of the role of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, a third party certifier, in the Australian salmonid aquaculture industry, she sheds a light on the ways in which community groups can grant or withhold social license to operate, ceasing industry progress despite its commitments to corporate social responsibility policies and certified standards. In gaining the community acceptance, she furthermore shows the capacity of third party certifiers to be accountable and the capacity of the regulatory system to ensure them legitimacy has an important role.

In the concluding article of this special issue, Michael Mintrom and Madeline Thomas look at the ways in which governance of collaborative service delivery can be augmented by exploring the neglected connection between design thinking and effective commissioning of public services. After discussing the potential benefits and challenges of collaboration in the realm of commissioning arrangements, they note evidence on how variation in the implementation and management of public services can generate strikingly different local outcomes. In addressing factors that may hinder
effective collaboration, they provide a general argument for how design thinking can contribute to more effective commissioning and improve the returns from public investments. Drawing insights from the illustrative case of Uncommon Schools, a nonprofit network of public charter schools operating in USA, they argue that harnessing the knowledge of local context through improved client engagement and design thinking approach can augment collaborative efforts in service delivery and increase the odds that public investments will generate anticipated social and economic outcomes.

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