

# Collaborative Futures – more or less ‘public’?

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## Abstract

Collaboration has become an important feature of public governance and management from the local to the global. The delivery of public purpose, in terms of how decisions are made, policies implemented or services delivered is increasingly reliant on collaboration manifest in different institutions, processes and relationships. In the 21<sup>st</sup> C we are constantly reminded of our interdependence as individuals, communities, organizations, economies and governments. Global challenges such as environmental sustainability require the development of new international institutions while regional economic and political developments do the same at the level of the EU; in both cases rendering geographical borders more permeable. Opportunities for reducing public expenditure and/or increasing productivity through the use of private or third sector suppliers and for increasing citizen control and service responsiveness through ‘co-production’ have breached the boundaries between public and private. Network governance is declared to have triumphed over hierarchy and markets.

Paradoxically this interdependence is accompanied by increasing diversity - of populations and their interests, needs and aspirations – and difference as values and ethics collide and ways of working conflict. This can make collaboration more difficult and in some cases impossible to secure. Navigating diversity and negotiating difference presents significant challenges for actors engaged in facilitating collaboration in terms of skills, capacities and resources.

In addition to these emerging challenges, evidence about collaboration to date suggests that it has not been an unqualified success. For example, the relationship between network governance, collaboration and representative democracy is frequently uneasy and some critics have argued that collaboration is undermining existing democratic institutions. The engagement of the private sector in the design and delivery of public infrastructure and services has also been subject to considerable criticism by those who argue that ‘partnership’ arrangements rarely afford equal benefits to the public and private partners. Finally the evidence of collaborative activity generating improvements in performance – of services or outcomes – is also contested. Add to these uncertainties the knowledge that collaborative activity is costly in terms of the financial, human and time resources that need to be invested and policy makers’ enthusiasm for collaboration, present in all of the recent party manifestos, becomes rather more difficult to comprehend.

In the context of these challenges and limitations this paper reconsiders why and how collaboration might feature in future public policy. It draws on different interpretations of ‘the public’ in its analysis and examines the extent to which they are helpful in shedding new light on collaborative conditions.

The paper aims to make use of the idea of ‘the public’ in three ways:

First it explores the way in which appeals to ‘the public’ have been used in the development of a new ‘common sense’ about the delivery of public services. This ‘common sense’ (used in the Gramscian sense to denote culturally constructed consent as distinct from ‘good

sense' which refers to critical engagement with contemporary concerns) suggests that 'the public', defined here as tax payers and consumers, is unconcerned about who delivers public services, provided they are delivered to a good standard and at reasonable cost. In addition to denying a particular role to the state as public service provider with attendant implications for the irrelevance or transferability of specific values and ethics that might inform its role, this new 'common sense' also legitimises the use of collaboration as a vehicle for the delivery of public services. Collaboration here then becomes (arguably) an expression of policy orientation towards 'the public' will. One consequence of this orientation is that it may inhibit the penetration of any 'good sense' critique of collaborative practice on public policy makers.

Second it examines how the development and operation of different collaborative arrangements are themselves 'public', i.e. visible to the public gaze. In a context in which 'the public' are said to be disinterested in the mode of public service delivery, to what extent are the development of new public/private, public/third sector arrangements a matter of 'public' concern or can they be less 'public' i.e. less visible? Who represents 'the public' in scrutinizing or regulating collaborative arrangements e.g. external regulators, politicians, and for what purpose?

Third it considers how a commitment to 'the public' as individual service users has changed the ways in which public services are designed and delivered. Recent emphasis on 'co-production' along with 'personalisation' and 'choice' have each appealed to the idea of the individual service user as the source of authority and expertise in what should be delivered and how it should be delivered. These developments have supported the generation of new collaborative ventures across a range of service areas. Proposals in some national party manifestos to afford authority to 'user publics' e.g. parents of school children to establish their own schools, indicates a move from an individual to a collective 'public' with attendant questions about how ideas of personalisation and individual choice can be sustained.

The paper concludes with a suggestion that the developments above can create the conditions in which collaborative futures are both more **and** less 'public'. While appeals to different 'publics' may encourage and extend collaborative action, the consequences of a new collaborative arrangements between individual service users and providers and/or public and private actors may serve to privatise relationships that were once public, limiting the development of collective solidarities and hindering the practice of democratic governance.