

Collaborative Capacity in Public Service Delivery Towards a Framework for Practice

Introduction and summary

The global public services landscape remains in flux. In the aftermath of the biggest economic upheaval for generations, leaders around the world are opening up profound questions about the role and purpose of government, and the scope and breadth of the public services provided to citizens.

This paper draws lessons from a range of British examples to form the basis of a delivery framework that can be discussed, adapted and applied internationally. It argues that public services at their best are the cornerstone of society. Yet in order to build the case for investment in what is an ideal at a time of extreme pressure, we need to make the case for a new model of delivery that addresses increasingly complex challenges through unlocking the collaborative capacity of citizens, the state, business and society.

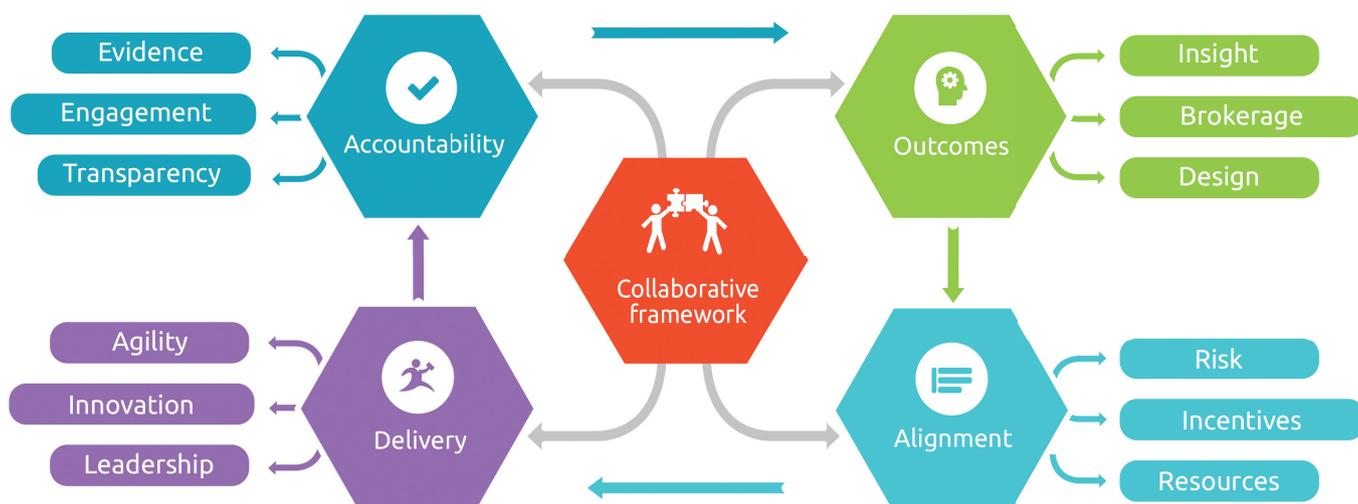
It is axiomatic that government, civil society and the private sector do not work collaboratively enough. Obvious differences in ethos and purpose (even within each of these sectors) often translate into uneasy alliances to deliver public goods. Yet, when the balance between collaboration and competition is right, the results for citizens can be remarkable, blending relationships, democracy and productivity to drive social purpose.

The root of such a re-orientation is a more meaningful relationship with what we have called the “collaborative citizen”. If public service reform is to be more than conversations between professionals, we need to get better at understanding what “active participation” could mean, and at preparing public leaders and front-line staff to facilitate it.

Our emerging framework for collaboration in public service delivery offers an entry point into these themes through a set of interdependent enablers, conditions and behaviours that could unlock “collaborative capacity” in public services, and ultimately generate better outcomes for citizens. This framework focuses on four main strands: Outcomes, Alignment, Delivery and Accountability, each divided into three sub-components. It is not, however, intended to provide an infallible blueprint, but by putting the “collaborative citizen” and public agencies in a relationship of mutual engagement, it aspires to be the starting point for innovative practice with the required flexibility to be applicable in both well-established welfare states and to those being newly developed.

This framework explores four stages of collaboration in public services delivery. The first is “outcomes”, covering the ways in which insight is generated, relationships are brokered and

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service interventions are designed to address these outcomes. The second is “alignment”, exploring the role that risk, incentives and resources play in building effective delivery partnerships. The third is “delivery”, arguing that innovation, agility and leadership characterize the best and most sustainable delivery partnerships. Fourth is “accountability”, showing how evidence, engagement and transparency underpin collaboration in delivery and create a case for reproducing and deepening it.

These themes are presented as a cyclical journey, beginning with outcomes, ending with accountability, and back to outcomes. This best reflects the journey I have seen policy makers and practitioners make, and is a way of structuring what is undoubtedly an interdependent set of themes and sub-themes. Some, such as design and innovation, have a hinterland of their own. My intention is not to dilute or ignore this, but to show how they fit within the broad spectrum of issues that public leaders have to address.

Serving the collaborative citizen

This framework is a starting point, designed to stimulate discussion on the potential collaborative capacity of public services, and on the dynamics that might unlock this to the benefit of service users and communities. There is neither a tried-and-tested blueprint nor a perfect recipe for public agencies, citizens and communities to address the range of challenges they face. Yet all must find imperfect ways of navigating changing patterns of supply and demand, and of addressing what are increasingly complex and in many cases intractable socio-economic problems.

Our work on the Collaborative Citizen argued that we should start this navigation process from the bottom up, disrupting and reshaping services from a position of a deeper form of insight, evidence and co-productive practice. Yet this will not happen by accident, especially not in a context where every

Evidence, accountability and democratic engagement are vital to sustaining social partnerships

incentive is given to the public manager to find short-term cuts and savings, despite a wealth of data about the long-term value of prevention and early intervention.

The public has been conspicuous by its absence from post-austerity debates about the scope and distribution of public entitlements. “Public services”, notes one expert response to *The Collaborative Citizen*, “form a main component of a ‘social contract’ between people and their governments... But that requires collective action from players on both sides on the contract, built on social capital, trust and shared values that allow and enable citizens to be co-productive agents in the relationship” (Parston, 2014). Building the capacity of government and public agencies to play this role requires us to develop new tools of public administration, and look beyond the policy toolkit of New Public Management. It can feel tangential when the short term challenge is to cut the cost of serving an increasingly demanding population. Yet it is arguably the only way to sustain productive systems that both support and draw from society, and that create wealth as well as spend it.

As the Canadian expert Jocelyn Bourgon has noted, much of the developed world lives with systems of public administration that are “not entirely of the past and not yet of the future” (Bourgon, 2011, p.7). So, as we look both for ways in which we can improve established welfare states, and for ways we can support countries that are building new ones, we hope to be able to draw from this emerging framework a starting point for new and innovative practice.

For a more detailed coverage of Collaborative Capacity please refer to the full paper and GCPSE’s other publications: www.bit.ly/GCPSE-evidence.

¹ See, for example, the range of data from the Early Intervention Foundation (2014).

References

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Author: Dr Henry Kippin, Collaborate



UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence

#08-01, Block A
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace West Coast,
Singapore 119620
T: +65 6908 1063
F: +65 6774 4571
E: registry.sg@undp.org

www.undp.org/publicservice
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