

# Evolution and Elements of Collaborative Governance Theory

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## Abstract:

With the advancement of globalization and the formation and development of a network society, there have been governance issues that cross departments, organizations, regions, and national borders, including environmental protection, immigration, international trade disputes, and digital government construction. Such a “thorny” problem is difficult to solve by a single organization, so cross-border collaborative governance has become increasingly important. In such an interdependent world, collaborative governance has begun to be widely concerned by academic circles. The attention to the theory of collaborative governance reached its first peak at the third Minobrook Conference and has gradually become a hot topic in the field of public administration in the last ten years. This paper focuses on the historical background of the evolution and development of collaborative governance theory, sorts out the definitions of collaborative governance by scholars at home and abroad, and introduces the main components of collaborative governance in the initial stage, process stage, and result stage. These achievements have certain reference significance for understanding collaborative governance.

**Keywords:** collaborative governance; evolution context; concept; elements.

## 1. Discrimination of the concept of collaborative governance

### 1.1 The Traceability of Collaborative Governance Theory

With the increasingly complex trend of public affairs, the original governance model and governance system are not enough to cope with the increasingly complex public affairs. Early public affairs can usually be led and completed by a single department and a single regional government. However, with the increasing complexity of public affairs, many public affairs involve different departments and units of different nature, which need to be completed by different departments and departments in different regions, and even the government, enterprises, and non-profit organizations. The era of single departments working alone has passed, and these complex affairs need the joint efforts of different departments to achieve common goals.

From the perspective of the paradigm shift of public administration, the traditional public sector is based on hierarchical bureaucracy, and usually only involves a single department. When it comes to cross-departmental cooperation, different departments can't direct each other because of their different subordinate relationships or consistent administrative levels, especially when their views and interests are inconsistent, it is often difficult to form effective cooperation between departments. The govern-

ment process of reengineering in the new public management movement is not enough to deal with all kinds of cross-sectoral governance problems, so it is urgent to develop a new theory to solve all kinds of problems faced by cross-sectoral cooperation. Under such an era background, the collaborative governance theory came into being.

### 1.2 Differentiation and Definition of the Concept of Collaborative Governance

The theory of collaborative governance has produced very fruitful theoretical results up to now, and it has become more diversified under the development of many scholars. Different scholars have different understandings and definitions of collaborative governance. This section will systematically review the definitions of different scholars at home and abroad around the concept of collaborative governance.

#### 1.2.1 Definition of Domestic Scholars

Li Hanqing believes that collaborative governance, as a new theory and the intersection of synergetics and governance theory, should be different from other theoretical paradigms. Li Hanqing believes that collaborative governance theory has the following characteristics: diversification of governance subjects, collaboration of subsystems, collaboration between self-organizing organizations, and formulation of common rules.

The representative definitions of the concept of collabora-

tive governance by domestic scholars include: Zheng Qiao and Xiao Wentao believe that “based on synergetic theory and governance theory, collaborative governance refers to the purpose of ... maintaining and enhancing public interests in the process of public life”. Cai Yandong thinks: “Based on synergetic theory, collaborative governance theory refers to the formation of a harmonious, orderly, efficient public governance network in the process of public life.”

Based on summarizing the existing research on collaborative governance, Zhou Lingyi summarized the characteristics of collaborative governance. She believes that “the concept of collaborative governance includes four core elements: the participation of multiple subjects, which can be cross-disciplinary cooperation, such as cooperation between the government and enterprises or social organizations, or cooperation between different participants in the same field, such as local governments or different functional departments; The subjects are interdependent, and the goals of coordination are complex, which is difficult to be achieved by a single subject due to the shortage of resources and the limitation of terms of reference. Public value orientation, the common goal of participants is to better provide a certain kind of public service or solve a specific social problem, which has a strong public value orientation; In the process of joint decision-making, participants communicate with each other, share resources and even power, and make joint decisions in terms of goal setting, resource arrangement, rulemaking and power and responsibility allocation.” (Zhou Lingyi, 2022).

Xianming Zhang and Hetian Yuqi also defined the concept and characteristics of collaborative governance. Xianming Zhang and Hetian Yuqi believe that the characteristics of collaborative governance mainly include: “First, collaboration has the characteristics of consistent goals, that is, different partners have consistency in goals, and goal consistency is usually the basis for different subjects to cooperate; Collaboration has the characteristics of resource sharing, that is, partners share information, knowledge and resources, and optimize the allocation of these resources to a certain extent; Thirdly, collaboration has the characteristics of benefit, that is, different partners need to overcome hitchhiking and work hard for the common goal of the group; Fourthly, collaboration is characterized by shared responsibility. Because of the vague boundaries and unclear division of powers and responsibilities in collaborative governance, even if the project fails to achieve the expected goals, each participant will bear certain risks and costs. Collaboration is characterized by deep interaction, and the purpose of collaboration is to reach a consensus. In the process of communication and negotiation between different collaborative subjects, it will be

found that the achievement of collaborative goals depends on cooperation with other collaborative governance, and the interdependence of various collaborative subjects will increase in the process “(Xianming Zhang & Tian Yuqi, 2016).

### 1.2.2 Definition of Foreign Scholars

Foreign academic circles have also shown great concern about collaborative governance, and a wide variety of definitions have emerged. This section will introduce some representative definitions.

American scholars Donahue and Zeckhauser define collaborative governance as “pursuing the officially selected public goals by working together with producers outside the government and sharing their discretion” (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2008).

Chi believes that collaborative governance refers to the situation in which participants work together as equal partners. Therefore, in collaborative governance, participants need to give up part of their independence or autonomy through formal or informal agreements. (Chi,2008).

O’Leary, Bingham, and Gerard(2006) define collaborative governance as “a means to guide the process of influencing decision-making and action in the private, public, and citizen sectors.” More specifically, governance is “a kind of coordination and supervision activity” that enables the partnership or institution to survive (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006).

Emerson et al. defined collaborative governance broadly as “the process and structure of public policy decision-making and management which enables people to cross the boundaries of public institutions, government levels and/or public, private and citizen fields constructively to achieve public goals that cannot be achieved by other means”. This definition allows collaborative governance to be more widely used in the analysis and construction of public management, allows different applications, categories, scales to be distinguished (Emerson, Nabatchi & Balogh,2012).

Ansell and Gash also have extensive influence on the definition of collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash define collaborative governance as “a governance arrangement in which one or more public institutions directly involve non-state stakeholders in a formal, consensus-oriented and prudent collective decision-making process, aiming at formulating or implementing public policies or managing public projects or assets”. Ansell and Gash pointed out that this definition contains six such criteria: forums are initiated by public institutions; Participants in the forum include non-state actors; Participants directly participate in decision-making, not just the “consultation” of public institutions; The participant forum of the forum is formal-

ly organized; The forum aims to make decisions by consensus; The focus of cooperation is public policy (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Western scholars have a basic consensus on the understanding of collaborative governance: actors outside the government join in governance; To achieve common goals, all actors work together (Tian Peijie, 2014).

## 2. Elements of Collaborative Governance

Collaborative governance as a complex governance activity, usually spans a long time dimension and covers more process elements. Therefore, in most collaborative governance studies, it is necessary to divide the stages of collaborative governance. The commonly adopted classification method in academic circles is three-stage division, that is, it is divided into initial stage, process stage, result stage. Ansell and Gash and Emerson et al (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012) also followed this division. This section will introduce the initial elements, process elements, and result elements of collaborative governance in detail.

### 2.1 The Initial Elements of Collaborative Governance

The emergence and development of collaborative governance need to have a certain objective basis. Ansell and Gash summarized the initial elements of collaborative governance as asymmetry of power-resources-knowledge, incentives and restrictions of participation, and history of cooperation or conflict. Ansell and Gash believe that the foundation of collaborative governance may be a favorable condition for promoting the emergence and operation of collaborative governance, and it may also be an unfavorable factor for hindering the emergence and development of collaborative governance. This section will sort out and review the initial elements of collaborative governance.

The asymmetry of power-resources-knowledge refers to the fact that the powers, resources, and knowledge possessed by collaborative subjects are not completely consistent, and the subjects of collaborative governance may have significant differences in status, actual power, disposable resources, professional knowledge, management knowledge. This difference can not only bring more diversity to collaborative governance but also benefit the generation of organizational vitality. However, the asymmetry of power, resources, and knowledge may also lead to differences in the discourse power and status of different collaborative governance. The dominant collaborative subject may put his interests in the first place and impose his views on other weak participants which may lead to

dissatisfaction of other weak participants and may even lead to the withdrawal of weak participants from collaboration, thus leading to the collapse of collaborative governance.

The incentive and restriction of participation refers to the participation motivation and objective conditions of the cooperative subject. The motivation for participation depends in part on the expectations of stakeholders on whether the cooperative process will produce meaningful results, especially the balance of time and energy needed for cooperation. The first is the incentive to participate in collaborative governance. When the collaborative subject thinks it is profitable to participate in the project, the collaborative subject will be willing to spend some time and trial and error costs to participate in the collaborative governance process, so the incentive to participate in collaboration is highly correlated with the willingness to participate in collaboration. From the perspective of participation restrictions, collaborative governance will set a certain threshold for participation in some cases. The higher the threshold, the higher the cost for participants to join collaborative governance, so the more restrictions, the less conducive to the emergence and development of collaborative governance.

The history of cooperation or conflict refers to whether there is a cooperative relationship or a contradiction between the participants in the last work. Good cooperation in the last work is conducive to the next cooperation. On the contrary, if there is an unpleasant experience in the previous cooperation, it will hurt the next cooperation.

### 2.2 Process Elements of Collaborative Governance

The process elements of collaborative governance refer to the development and operation process of collaborative governance, and different scholars have different classification methods. This paper mainly introduces the classification methods of Emerson and others and divides the process elements of collaborative governance into principled participation, common motivation, the ability to act together.

Principled participation means that the participation of cooperative subjects is principled, which mainly includes fair dialogue, open, inclusive communication, and the decision-making process is decided by all participants. As Ansell and Gash said, it is important to get the “right” people to sit at the negotiating table. Emerson and others divide principled participation into four aspects: discovery, definition, deliberation, decision, and these four elements form the basis of collaborative governance.

Common motivation refers to the consistency of participants’ participation. Emerson and others define common

motivation as a self-reinforcing cycle, which consists of four elements: mutual trust, understanding, internal legitimacy, and commitment. Common motivation is also called social capital in some literature. Mutual trust and understanding refers to the degree of trust and understanding of the cooperative subjects to each other. Mutual trust and understanding produce a feeling of interpersonal verification and cognitive ability, which is called internal legitimacy. When the participants have high consistency, the cooperative subjects will directly have a commitment relationship, which is also called common commitment.

The ability of joint action refers to the sum of all kinds of abilities and resources possessed by the cooperative subjects to accomplish the cooperative goals. Emerson and others summarize the ability of joint action into procedures and institutional arrangements, leadership, knowledge, and resources. Procedures and institutional arrangements refer to a series of basic rules of protocol mediation, operating protocols, decision-making rules, and so on, which are constructed by cooperative subjects to achieve the goal of collaboration. This institutionalized norm is conducive to the operation of collaborative governance. Leadership refers to the command and dispatch ability of collaborative leaders. Knowledge and resources refer to the sum of all kinds of resources and knowledge needed for collaborative governance.

### **2.3 The Results of Collaborative Governance Elements**

The result elements of collaborative governance refer to the results of collaborative governance, which are usually manifested as the output of collaborative governance or the performance of collaborative governance, including what kind of results have been achieved by collaborative governance and whether the efficiency of achieving these results is high or low. The result element of collaborative governance is the evaluation and examination of collaborative governance.

This paper focuses on the background of collaborative

governance theory and its constituent elements. By reviewing the achievements of different scholars at home and abroad, it sorts out the definition and classification of collaborative governance by scholars at home and abroad, and systematically sorts out the constituent elements of collaborative governance in different development stages, which has certain reference significance for readers to understand collaborative governance.

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