
Interorganizational Collaboration for Regional Sustainability: What Happens When Organizational Representatives Come Together?

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Abstract

This article presents a critical-interpretive investigation of an interorganizational collaboration for regional sustainability. It highlights the potential and problems in such a process and exposes how sustainable development influences collaboration. Through collaborating, members can develop a better understanding of the economic, social, and environmental issues affecting their region's sustainability and challenging their organizations' legitimacy. By sharing experiences and expectations of sustainable development, members can also develop better relationships and respond to various pressures for sustainable development. However, the ideological foundations of sustainable development philosophy can make such collaboration an extremely tense and political process. As members explore solutions that integrate environmental, economic, and social sustainability dimensions in the local and regional context, they may also strive to preserve or enhance their organizational interests. Ultimately, they may compromise on fairly easy or abstract solutions that can build their organization's reputation and legitimacy rather than serve the wider remit of sustainable development.

Keywords

interorganizational collaboration, sustainability, regulation

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Following the recommendation of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED; 1987), proponents of sustainable development contend that society should be developed so as to “meet the needs of present generations without compromising the abilities of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 8). The sustainable development philosophy emanating from this WCED report underscores that economic growth and development planning should prioritize and integrate social development and environmental conservation issues. Economy, society, and environment constitute the three pillars on which the holistic philosophy of sustainable development philosophy has been developed. The philosophy calls for simultaneously addressing the three pillars and taking a long-term view. Economic sustainability is a state where the economy is strong and vibrant; social sustainability is a state where there is social equity and peace and justice for all; and environmental sustainability is a state where the natural environment, including wildlife and ecosystems, is well preserved and flourishes (Hediger, 1997; Meadowcroft, 2000; Pearce, 1993). Thus, sustainable development is a process of social change that can hopefully help societies achieve sustainability (Connor & Dovers, 2004). Sustainability is the vision of an ideal future state that is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

Almost two decades have passed since governments began seriously thinking about sustainable development and engaging in collaborations and other efforts in a bid to achieve it. However, the social change toward sustainability has been slower than anticipated (Diamond, 2005; Sachs, 2005). Sustainable development has not been able to successfully manifest itself in current modes of organizing under capitalism (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999). Problems surrounding poverty, inequity, and environmental degradation are mostly increasing exponentially, globally, nationally, and locally (Diamond, 2005; Sachs, 2005) and are being seen as key sources of civil unrest (Hart, 2007).

Implementing sustainable development is problematic for several reasons (Banerjee, 2003; Bansal, 2002; Dovers & Handmer, 1992). There is a great deal of ambiguity and widespread disagreement about the details and achievability of sustainability (Hediger, 1999; Pearce & Barbier, 2000). Sustainability is a dynamic state. For it to become a reality, it is “not enough to adjust policies and recommendations to present day realities” (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 5); collectively, we need to anticipate changes and proactively respond to problems of tomorrow. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need agreements on some fundamental issues, for example, elimination of subsidies for unsustainable activities and encouragement toward responsible use of resources, particularly nonrenewable resources, in the production and consumption of goods and services (Brown, 1996; Hawken, 1993). There is an argument that developed countries and regions should offer financial assistance to build capacity of developing and underdeveloped countries to deal with economic, social, and environmental problems (Hart & Milstein, 1999; Tisdell, 2001). Moreover, there is debate around global, national, and regional policies needed to support local trade, protect the natural environment, ensure justice for all, and bring about radical changes that lead to sustainability (Goulet, 2004; Hart, 2007). Hence, the United Nations Organization, business

lobbies such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, and various academics (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995; Roome & Wijen, 2005) have been strongly promoting multilateral and collaborative approaches at various levels to bring about agreement on these issues. There are widespread expectations that organizations, especially those in the policy arena, should collaborate with each other and with community stakeholders to institutionalize sustainable development (Sharma & Starik, 2004; United Nations, 1992, 1993).

However, both the literature on collaboration and that on the attainment of sustainability recognize that collaborations and sustainable development, despite their potential and popularity (Gray, 1999; Pasquero, 1991; Turcotte & Pasquero, 2001), could be problematic processes of social engagement (Gray, 2004; Kitchen, Whitney, & Littlewood, 1997; Poncelet, 2001). Considering some of the inherent complexities that we discuss in greater depth next, and in light of a local example of collaboration for sustainable development, we began to explore more deeply the effectiveness of inter-organizational collaborations in advancing sustainable development.

We find there is a dearth of empirical studies that evaluate not only the potential but also the actual praxis of collaboration for sustainability. There is a need for penetrating and realistic understandings of such processes, especially when policy makers are increasingly depending on collaborations to drive progress toward sustainability (Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007). A more realistic picture of collaborative organizing for sustainable development may be gained through empirical studies that recognize that “change in sustainable development planning scenarios is driven by disequilibrium” (Meppem & Gill, 1998, p. 129) emanating from heterogeneous values, changing urban/environment relationships, technical innovation, and structural changes in communities. Such studies should surpass the objective “conceptual assumptions of equilibrium and linearity” (Meyer, Gaba, & Colwell, 2005, p. 458) and attempt to “critically” capture the subjective, dynamic, and political nature of human engagements of collaborations (Gray, 1985, 1989; Gray & Wood, 1991; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Hardy & Phillips, 1998; Lotia & Hardy, 2008).

We take such an approach in this article. First, we present a “realist tale,” following Van Maanen (1988), of an interorganizational collaboration for sustainability. Then, we use a critical-interpretive methodology to explore the potential and problems when organizations attempt to collaborate for sustainability and why they may fall short of achieving complete success. In our analysis, we simultaneously exercise “hermeneutics of faith” and “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Prasad & Mir, 2002; Ricoeur, 1991): although our analysis is hopeful in respect of the potential of such collaborations, it is also fairly skeptical of the communicative distortions and asymmetric human relationships (Habermas, 1987) that may constitute interorganizational collaboration for sustainability.

Our study is focused on the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do institutional mandates influence the dynamics of the collaboration?

Research Question 2: What challenges does the pursuit of sustainability goals pose for collaborative initiatives?

Research Question 3: How can organizations involved in sustainable development work to best realize the promise of collaboration?

We generate insights into these questions by analyzing an interorganizational collaboration for sustainability between eight local authorities in a prominent region of New Zealand. Our analysis uses data on the process collected through participant observation of meetings, semistructured interviews, and public policy and organizational documents.

The article has the following structure. First, we provide a brief review of the literature on collaborations. We then more fully discuss the promise of collaboration in the context of sustainable development. Second, we introduce the collaboration and our research methods. Third, using emergent themes from the data, we present a narrative of members' collaborative experiences as a "realist tale" (Van Maanen, 1988). Fourth, we integrate the empirical analysis with collaboration and sustainable development literature and present a critical-interpretive perspective (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) in our discussion on the potential and problems in this interorganizational collaboration for sustainability. Fifth, we conclude the article with some broader recommendations for enhanced practice.

This article contributes to literature on collaboration and sustainable development. It provides a "critical-interpretive" perspective (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) of interorganizational collaborations that operate in complex, ambiguous, and multidisciplinary social contexts such as sustainable development (Biermann, Mol, & Glasbergen, 2007). This study goes beyond the environmental sustainability perspective that the majority of collaboration and sustainability scholars within the field of management and organizational studies have adopted in their research (Egri & Herman, 2000; Gray, 2004; Turcotte & Pasquero, 2001). Instead, it embraces the "holistic" philosophy of sustainable development that is based on the three pillars of economic, social, and environmental sustainability and unmasks how individuals make sense of these dimensions in their interorganizational enactments around sustainability. It also concentrates on the human relational aspects of collaborative "organizing" (Weick, 1979) that are very central to the institutionalization of sustainable development (Hampton, 1999; Hempel, 1999; Peterson, 1997; Selman & Parker, 1997).

Literature Review

Interorganizational Collaboration

Collaborations may be seen as "networks of relationships" (Dyer & Singh, 1998, p. 660) that, ideally, are mutually beneficial to participating organizations (Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, & Ring, 2008b). By collaborating with others confronting similar problems, organizations can share resources and lower problem-solving costs (Turcotte, 2000).

They may implement changes more effectively as a collective than they otherwise would. They may be able to devise more innovative solutions and more speedily act toward their resolution. Collaborations have the potential for some intangible benefits as well. They can facilitate mutual learning and value creation. They may lead to improved relationships with stakeholders. If people see that organizations are collaborating among themselves and are also collaborating directly with relevant stakeholders on important issues, they may feel more assured that those organizations are responsible and concerned about wider interests and general well-being. Thus, by collaborating, organizations may enhance their collective problem-solving skills, increase the scope and extent of their responsibilities, and gain greater support from stakeholders for organizational decisions (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Gray, 1989).

A process-based approach enables scholars to investigate the dynamics of relationships and interdependencies and some of the other perhaps less tangible benefits collaborations can potentially bring about (Gray & Wood, 1991). Promoting such an approach to research on collaborations, Gray (1989) identifies collaboration as “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (p. 5). Communication plays a critical role in this process. Hardy et al. (2005) recognize collaborations as products of “sets of conversations” (p. 58) among two or more members, during which members create a collective identity, which in turn influences the collaboration. Ideally, the parties involved have an opportunity to critically analyze their own and others’ perspectives and participate in generating a richer and more comprehensive shared understanding of the problem at hand (Gray, 2000; Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Roberts and Bradley (1991) advise that collaboration should be duly recognized for its open-ended character—as a reflexive self-evolving social process with social outcomes among others (see also Andriof & Waddock, 2002).

Collaborations may also be seen as political processes (Huxham & Beech, 2008; Lotia & Hardy, 2008). Members of collaboration are interdependent, and often those interdependencies are asymmetric (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971). When one member is more dependent on others, for resource or legitimacy reasons, then such imbalance in interdependencies produces “effects of power” (Foucault, 1982, p. 787). Consequently, collaborations can become problematic experiences and especially so when members’ interests and missions “cross-cut in a variety of different ways” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 37). Members representing different organizations may want to maintain their organizational identities and interests distinct from those of the collaboration. As a result, they may struggle to find a compromise between their “organizational self-interest” and the “collective interest” (Thomson, Perry, & Miller, 2009). Conflict may arise if the collaboration proposes or adopts changes that go against individuals’ self-interests (Gray & Ariss, 1985). Conflicts may also result from differences among the members, including different problem-solving approaches, different organizational cultures, unequal access to resources, unequal social connections and expertise, and unequal opportunities to define problems, propose solutions and/or develop collaborative agendas (Eisenberg & Witten, 1987; Gray, 1989, 2000; Hardy &

Phillips, 1998; Vlaar, Bosch, & Volberda, 2006). Ineffective facilitation might also lead to discontent and unresolved conflicts (Huxham & Vangen, 2000; O'Leary & Bingham, 2007). Conflicts may also emerge if members distrust each other (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003).

Trust is a critical component of any collaboration (Bachman & Zaheer, 2008; Wood & Gray, 1991). Members' commitment to collaboration "depends on trust" (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 559). Members' distrust of each other acts as a "psychological barrier" to collaborations (Rondinelli & London, 2002, p. 202). Trust can help in cementing or rupturing relationships during collaboration. Building trust, however, is not an easy exercise. It is a time-consuming process (Lawrence, 2002) that generally requires partners to be transparent and honest in their mutual dealings. If members carry negative prejudices, based on any history of failed or unprecedented collaborations, then they may find it difficult to trust others in the collaboration. Lack of trust may mean they do not fully commit themselves to the process, which may then render collaboration ineffective (Bachman & Zaheer, 2008).

There are different ways of evaluating the effectiveness as well as the efficiency of collaborations. For example, one may evaluate collaborations through use of "process indicators" that can help assess subprocesses of "learning, trust, fairness, legitimacy and power" (Provan & Sydow, 2008, p. 699) taking place within collaborations (Gray, 2000). Or one may choose to evaluate tangible outcomes through "outcome indicators" such as innovation and financial and nonfinancial performance, or even survival, as well as through reports or other outcomes as required by regulatory or accounting bodies (Provan & Sydow, 2008). Our analysis combines a focus on both the process and outcomes. We explore tangible and intangible benefits derived from collaboration and the problems experienced.

Inherent Challenges in Sustainable Development

Academics and policy makers have promoted interorganizational collaboration as one of the most vital mechanisms to implement sustainable development (Glasbergen, Biermann, & Mol, 2007). Implementing sustainable development, however, has proven to be highly challenging (Banerjee, 2003; Gladwin et al., 1995; Starik & Rands, 1995). Sustainable development is a highly ambitious, ambiguous, ideologically based, and politically contested philosophy (Berke & Conroy, 2000; Lafferty, 1996). It is highly ambitious in that it calls on human beings to "reform human institutions" (Dresner, 2002, p. 168) in ways that drastically reduce the negative impacts of anthropogenic actions on others. Those "others" include other human beings as well as other living beings and natural resources, not only in and across present generations but also in future generations (Hediger, 1999). The sustainable development philosophy also has strong moral dimensions. Its "three E" foundations of economy, equity, and environment call for balancing values during decision making so as to achieve sustainability across all three pillars—economic, social, and environmental—at the same time (Berke & Conroy, 2000). With such a broad, transdisciplinary, and long-term

focus, sustainable development is prone to varying philosophical, ethical, and disciplinary interpretations. Different social actors use the philosophy in ways that suit their ideologies and political agendas (Pearce, 1993).

Some of the practical hurdles in implementing sustainable development emerge from its conceptual foundations (Dresner, 2002). To achieve sustainability, transformations at, at least, three levels—individuals, organizations, and society—have to take place (Egri & Pinfield, 1996; Waddell, 2005). Institutions, social structures, and relationships have to change in ways that increasingly integrate social and environmental considerations into economic planning and day-to-day decision-making (Egri & Herman, 2000; United Nations, 1992). To achieve such a transition, organizational and management scholars and practitioners of sustainability have called for increased collaboration among government, businesses, and community organizations (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995; Roome & Wijen, 2005; Sharma, 2002). The widespread belief is that individual organizations will most likely fail in unilateral attempts to solve complex and systemic problems, for example, those emanating from economic development, social dislocation, and unsustainable use of resources, including critical ones such as clean air and water. Their efforts would founder because sustainability “problem domains” are often multifaceted and involve multiple constituencies (Chisholm, 2008) and cross place and time. They implicate individuals, organizations, and societies in ways that challenge current practices. They require multidisciplinary approaches and expertise that can aid understanding of the complexity of those problems (Biermann et al., 2007) and agreement on potential solutions. Individual organizations are unlikely to have all the requisite skills, expertise, and resources at their disposal to resolve such major problems. There is a greater likelihood that collective rather than individualized approaches will contribute to sustainable development (Logsdon, 1991; Meppem & Gill, 1998; Presas, 2001).

In particular, there have been increasing calls inviting greater public participation in public policy processes surrounding sustainability (Roberts & Bradley, 1991; United Nations, 1992). The message is that policy makers should collaborate with stakeholders and seek to engage with them in a nonhierarchical and democratic manner. Such an approach would help bridge the perceived communication gap between policy experts and stakeholders (Brinkerhoff, 2007). With community stakeholder engagement, policy makers may cultivate a better appreciation of the depth and interconnectedness of complex local problems (Freeman, Littlewood, & Whitney, 1996). They may be able to develop innovative public policies, systems, and structures to solve those problems (Roberts & Bradley, 1991). Their collaboration with community stakeholders may also help them become efficient and enable them to offer “seamless services” to citizens (Sandfort & Milward, 2008, p. 148). Collaborative approaches may also lend openness, transparency, legitimacy, and credibility to the functioning of government organizations, especially (Velasquez, 2001). Indeed, in many settings, policy makers are increasingly engaging with their stakeholders in a bid to understand and implement sustainable development policies (Berke & Conroy, 2000; Burgess & Harrison, 1998; Lapintine, 1998) and derive at least some of the above benefits.

Our case study sheds light on some of the on-the-ground realities of intergovernmental collaboration for sustainability. In doing so, we highlight the potential of inter-organizational collaborations as well as some of the problematic experiences of policy makers collaborating for sustainability. We begin by providing the contextual background on the actual collaboration and describing our research methods.

Research Context and Methodology

New Zealand Regulatory Context and the Case Site

We analyzed an interorganizational collaboration within the sustainable development policy arena in New Zealand. In tune with increasing international interest in sustainable development, the nation witnessed a legislative change with the Local Government Act (LGA) of 2002 mandating local authorities to plan for, and implement sustainable development of their communities. Section 10 of the LGA (2002) states that the “purpose of the local government” is

(a) to enable democratic local decision-making and action by, and on behalf of, communities; and

(b) to promote the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of communities, in the present and for the future. (p. 29)

The legislation specifically encouraged local authorities to collaborate with their stakeholders to achieve their respective sustainability missions, but it was not precise about the form the actual collaboration should take. Stakeholders not only included the community stakeholders from their city, district, or regions but also other local authorities in the region. Subsection 14(1)(e) of the LGA 2002 articulates the following as one of the “principles relating to local authorities” in New Zealand:

A local authority should collaborate and co-operate with other local authorities and bodies as it considers appropriate to promote and achieve its priorities and desired outcomes, and make efficient use of resources. (p. 31)

Each local authority was required under the legislation to develop a long-term council community plan that addressed “community outcomes”—the things community stakeholders considered important for its social, economic, environmental well-being. Local authorities had to identify these outcomes in consultation with their stakeholders. The process we investigated was a case of collaboration for regional sustainability. The eight local authorities—one overarching regional authority and seven constituent authorities each with responsibility for a smaller territory, such as a district or a city—involved in the collaboration were charged with responsibility for sustainable development of the region.

The collaboration's broad goal was to address sustainability issues and challenges for the region. The region was strategically important for New Zealand's economy as it made one of the largest contributions toward the national gross domestic product. The local authorities faced significant challenges because of the region's fast-paced economic growth and unsustainable development. Moreover, they had to respond to the above-mentioned long-term sustainability planning requirements of the new law. Through the collaboration, they were attempting to address sustainability of their region in an integrated fashion and jointly identify regional community outcomes. They were planning to incorporate those outcomes in their respective local and regional sustainable community plans. They were also hoping to develop processes for monitoring regional community outcomes, collectively, to ensure that their plans were successfully promoting the economic, social, and environmental well-being of the various communities in the region.

Thus, all the local government representatives involved in the collaboration were influenced indirectly and directly by the international, national, regional, and local institutional context surrounding sustainable development, as well as by their individual local authorities' policies and practices.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple techniques were used to collect data on this collaboration over a 1-year period, from September 2004 to November 2005. The lead author participated and observed in six organizational meetings, each of 2 hours duration. Out of a total of 25 members, 10 to 14 attended those meetings. The average attendance was 10 members. Most of the members occupied senior-level strategy positions in their organization—these were permanent nonelected positions. In her field notes, the lead author tried to capture statements verbatim, as she was not allowed to tape-record conversations during meetings. She also jotted down notes that gave her the cues to elaborate fully and summarize the discussions once she left the research site. She interviewed 7 members regarding their expectations and experiences of the collaboration and sustainability. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour. In addition, we referred to New Zealand statutes and public policy documents pertaining to sustainability. We also used data from collaboration documents, dating from 2003 to 2005, which included minutes of meetings, other meeting documentations, e-mails, annual reports, strategic plans, media releases, and websites. In all, the data comprised around 610,000 words.

We did a line-by-line open coding of the meeting and interview transcripts, field notes, and collaboration document. We used criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness in the data (Owen, 1984) and the constant comparison tradition during the coding. We compared data on the same issue or incident as expressed either by different members, or by the same member, over different periods of time (Charmaz, 1994). We also compared data on issues raised by members during meetings and interviews with those reported in strategic documents. The lead author did the first set of analysis.

She broadly coded and separated factors relating to sustainable development and the collaboration. Various collaboration, organizational cultures, and individual behavioral issues around the concept of learning, time, confusions and frustration, politics and distrust, and compromise were inductively generated from the data. She compared all the sustainable development, collaboration, organizational culture, and individual behavior concepts with more incidents. This was how she theoretically elaborated, saturated, verified, and made those concepts dense. She wrote theoretical memos, compared those concepts, and identified relationships among them (Glaser, 1978; Lofland, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The second author then independently analyzed a smaller sample of the data (around 50%). She analyzed the legislation, the annual reports of the eight local authorities, and a random selection of collaboration documents, minutes, and field notes of meetings, select press releases, and interviews. We then compared the two sets of analyses, discussed the common themes we had individually identified from our analysis, and cross-checked for validity of any differing interpretations by revisiting the data together. We developed the realist tale jointly through several iterations and shared in the writing up of the remainder of the article. Furthermore, to ensure that our findings fairly represented the process and outcomes of the collaboration, we shared an earlier draft of the article with the facilitator of the collaboration. She validated our findings and informed us that the tale we told and our analyses accurately represented the unfolding of various events and intricacies of the collaboration. She requested us to offer additional details on the context of the collaboration, which we did.

Data collection concluded in November 2005 when we realized that we had reached a state of theoretical saturation—no new themes were emerging from the analysis. At that point, the collaboration was moving toward exploring a new set of sustainability goals that were beyond the permitted scope and duration of our research.

Data Presentation

We integrated the common themes that emerged from our respective analyses and wrote a “realist tale” (Van Maanen, 1988) about this collaboration. The tale is our story of collaborative engagement among individuals who were representing their organization and were charged with carrying forward their respective local authority’s agendas on regional sustainability. The story has been developed based on our analysis and interpretations of the field notes of meetings and interview transcripts and analysis and the regulatory context of the collaboration. Although the tale is inevitably our tale, as narrators, we also wanted to represent, fairly, the different members’ viewpoints of the collaboration. So, following Van Maanen’s (1988) recommendation, we incorporate short direct quotes from members’ interviews and meeting discussions and excerpts from the field notes and organization and public policy documents that are illustrative of the generally shared views and opinions. In some instances, we also provide longer quotes from individual members to illustrate further the different themes and subtle differences in perspectives.

Tale of an Inter-Local Governmental Organizing for Sustainability

The following tale of interorganizational collaborative organizing for sustainability involved local government representatives. We narrate the development of their collaboration through the following five themes: (a) rationalizing sustainable development, (b) rationalizing collaboration for sustainable development, (c) encountering organizational differences, (d) experiencing interorganizational politics, and (e) compromising for organizational good. Together, these themes reflect members' collaborative experiences and the potential and problems in interorganizational collaboration for sustainability.

Rationalizing Sustainable Development

Members started their collaboration by talking about sustainable development. They appreciated that sustainable development was about designing social systems and processes that would lead to a quality of life for their "children and grand children" that is "at least as good as, if not better" than present standards. Members also recognized that they faced significant pressures to manage the growth of their cities, districts, and the region. They talked about economic development, social development, and environmental conservation of their region and of the various cities and districts that constituted their region. They talked about the need to integrate those three different pillars of sustainability in their planning. One member stated,

We have not taken a broader view of what a successful city is. We need to be doing that now. There are some very dynamic things happening in our city. The nature of our population has changed quite radically, in terms of culture. It makes sense for us to be thinking about cultural and social outcomes as well as economic and probably environmental . . . so the whole gamut!

Most members acknowledged that their organizations had taken a "much too short-term view [of development] in the past." There had been a greater emphasis on "getting things right for people, now." Although such a focus "might have worked for now," it would "not work for the long-term." One member pointed out that "sustainability is probably coming of age in [the region], really now, rather than probably, 5 or 10 years ago." Another member highlighted,

Our council's view on sustainability? Yeah, I guess that changed with the election of the new council, last year. I think it would be fair to say that prior to the local body election, you wouldn't really have heard that term *sustainability* really being used. And although it was in the officers' language, there was not a lot of "buy-in" at a political level, which obviously impacted as in what was fed into council's direction. It is interesting to note what the current council has to

say. I think the main line of the introduction of the draft annual plan, which makes a statement like “[Our] city is committed to sustainability.”

The local authorities participating in the collaboration were “at quite a pivotal point for lots of reasons.” They faced legislative pressures. With new legislation mandating sustainable development as the foundation for local government in New Zealand, local authority executives and members of the collaboration realized that they now had to think very seriously about the sociocultural and environmental consequences of economic growth. They had to identify “the kinds of long-term trends and impacts” that might affect their communities. They had to work out “what [did they] need to be a successful city in the long term—30 to 50 years plus.” They had to “feed [that kind of information] into their planning processes.” They had to “work really hard to manage that kind of tension between growth and people’s increasing expectations of what they want!” They had to work toward providing long-term benefits and security to the region’s residents. If local authorities did not “take a long-term view and get that balance right” now, then there could be “all sorts of negative impact on the economic well-being of the region in the long term.”

Members also recognized that regional stakeholders—residents, businesses, and other organizations in the region—were interested in sustainability, too. Citizen stakeholders were presumed not interested in “doom and gloom, but the positives.” It seemed they wanted to “know how [local authorities] can overcome issues.” They apparently wanted to see “a local authority that is strong, willing to see the future and plan ahead, not wait until the problem’s here.” Stakeholder pressure seemed stronger than in the past. One member confessed,

I suppose we need to be seen as credible to our stakeholders. And part of that is we have got to talk to each other and work together—to have that credibility. . . . So, it’s critical that we have got credibility with our stakeholders and we expect to have it as well! So, to try and kind of develop a way that we can work together—that we kind of build that credibility.

Thus, coming together to discuss sustainable development got members thinking about the past, present, and future of their communities and the region—and the need to work together.

Rationalizing Collaboration for Sustainable Development

The legislative change around sustainable development prompted members to collaborate with the other local authorities. They had to “talk [together] about the future” of the region. Members entered the collaboration as representatives of their local authorities and with those organizations apparently inclined to change some of their current practices, partly based on lessons from the past. Members seemed keen to contribute actively to the sustainability of the region. They recognized the interdependence

between local sustainability and regional sustainability. They knew that they had responsibilities connected with sustainability of local and regional communities. One member pointed out:

We are so linked to the region that we cannot separate ourselves from it! So, what happens in the region is incredibly important to us! It goes both ways. We are dependent on, let's say, the city part of the region for a lot of economic and social sustainability. The city part of the region is very dependent on us for recreational and some environmental and social sustainability aspects.

However, members also acknowledged the challenges they were facing in forging those linkages. They recognized a tendency to "forget" that interdependence as they pursued their local organizational missions. A member expressed her concern,

Obviously, we have to get things right in the region as well! . . . And there is a bit of concern that we are being distracted by more and more regional stuff, that central government is trying to drive us to being involved in, rather than our local business. So, obviously, that makes it more difficult to engage.

Overall, members initially saw appeal in the idea of collaborating with other local authorities in the region to achieve sustainability. They would fulfill some of the regulatory expectations around collaboration. By collaborating, they hoped they could save time and resources. They would get "to know other people in the region, who are trying to do similar things," and "from their experiences, learn things." One member highlighted,

Because of the nature of the outcomes, it is not something that we can do completely on our own! We are going to need other people and working with them on that, I think, will have financial implications. It will save us a lot of money and resource by working with them.

Members mentioned that other executives in their local authorities were also concerned about optimally using the time of community stakeholders and minimizing "consultation burnouts." The collaboration was planned as a means of collectively engaging with the community for regional sustainability, at the same time and through the same forum, rather than the regional and local authorities each doing so independently. Moreover, members hoped that their collaboration would help them understand some of the legislative complexities in the new legislation and clarify ambiguities. During the process, they talked about the new legislation and shared their confusions and frustrations. During one of the meetings, one member pointed out "ambiguities among central government agencies about what is the priority for the region." Another said, "There seems to be lot of tension among the central government agencies about who is leading this stuff." Members shared that they were not sure about whether the

community outcomes were set or whether they would constantly evolve because of “intergenerational” factors inherent in sustainable development. They debated “the longevity of the community outcomes and future changes.” One member pointed out that “every 6 years the community outcomes have to be revisited and relooked at. This would mean that the long-term council community plan would have to be revised as well.” Some members claimed such constant evaluations of community’s expectations and revisions of strategic plan were crucial for sustainable development.

As members collectively explored the requirements of the new legislation, they started realizing that their involvement in institutional change toward sustainability was not going to be easy. It was “not going to be a fast process.” It was “like one of those projects—the more you get into, the bigger it gets.” It was a “process of organizational change.” Their local authorities would need to change as well, as they adopted sustainable development in their missions. The members often reflected that “change requires time” and how demanding the change process would be. A member shared that it had taken his local authority 3 years to make sense of what was required to bring about positive changes in the community. As the organization began making those changes, it was now time for it to revisit how citizen stakeholders’ expectations of sustainability had changed and change its strategic sustainability plans accordingly. Members were concerned that if the local authorities were required to “change community outcomes every 6 years, then [they] will not be able to go anywhere,” in their sustainability efforts.

Members were concerned that their local authorities’ involvement in sustainable development of their communities was going to be an immensely technical, resource-intensive and costly exercise. They wanted to make faster and more significant strides toward sustainability and fulfill their organizational obligations—but it was too complex a task for a single local authority. One of the strategic documents for the collaboration stated,

With billions of dollars to be spent on transport in the region over the next decade, the government requires [regional policy and district plan on sustainable development] reviews to be complete by [end of 2005]. By working together we can meet these deadlines and ensure that reviews are efficient and effective.

Thus, members hoped that through their collaboration they could “do things in a way that [they] all could achieve [their] individual objectives collectively in the shortest time frame.” By collaborating, they could “maximize effectiveness,” “minimize the costs,” and “use resources more efficiently.”

Encountering Organizational Differences

Despite recognizing how collaboration could potentially help their organizations meet various expectations around sustainable development, members encountered challenges.

They realized that the local authorities they represented differed from one another. The local authorities' sustainability foci differed. They were embracing different aspects of sustainable development philosophy—economic growth, sociocultural development, and environmental conservation and enhancement—with different degrees of priority. One local authority had a very strong focus on social sustainability aspects mostly “because of [its] internal culture.” It was not “that there was no focus on environmental sustainability. But it [was] not [the] priority.” Some others had predominantly adopted an environmental focus. Consequently, during meetings, members approached sustainable development arguing for different foci and priorities.

Not only were they representing “organizations with different cultures,” the individual local authorities were also “at very different points” in their drive toward sustainability. They had “different community outcomes processes” and were “at different stages in developing their frameworks.” They were following “different time lines.” At one stage during the collaboration, “three of the territorial authorities had provided their draft community outcomes to the [regional authority]. Other territorial authorities had not yet completed draft outcomes.” Individual local authorities also had “different processes for engaging with regional stakeholders.”

The local authorities were confronting pressures related to sustainability with varying capabilities and levels of expertise, and senses of urgency. One local authority had developed a long-term vision for sustainability of its community “very early on,” before the new legislation. The member representing this local authority claimed it had a “history.” It was “ahead of other local authorities.” It was “leading”—and some members did indeed see it as a “leader in the field” of sustainability. Other local authorities were midway. Some were “far behind” others in that they had scarcely begun to engage in holistic sustainable development thinking. One member noted,

I guess, we are quite early on that path—sustainability—particularly, compared to the [other] city . . . I don't think [our] city is in that position, yet, either in terms of how we plan for the future of the city or indeed, how we, as an organization, operate. There is some work that has become active in the last couple of months, around what corporate sustainability means for [our] city. So, it's becoming much higher up in the agenda, both at officer level and politically. And I guess, it has started to kind of drive how much of our council does its business. But what sort of speed does that happen and what impact does it have, we will have to wait and see.

Although they seemed to share some similar ideas around sustainable development at a more abstract level, members had varying expectations from sustainable development in practice. Some expected change in the long term and wanted a long-term orientation to prevail. Others had a short-term focus. Some expected social change toward sustainability to be slow, and others expected it to occur quickly. Members and their local authorities also had divergent interests in and expectations from the collaboration. Organizational differences greatly influenced how members

viewed the collaboration and their engagement with others. Lack of clear understanding of the new legislation, and divergence in priorities within sustainability, and different organizational paces in the sustainability drive caused confusion. Members became frustrated with the collaboration as they “were not clear enough about what [they were] supposed to achieve. What was the kind of framework [they] were operating within?” It seemed to some of them that during the collaboration they were “running around in knots.” Conceptual ambiguities about more substantial aspects of sustainable development further complicated affairs and their communication. One member highlighted,

I think, in the beginning the hardest thing was talking to all different councils, talking about outcomes. I was not quite understanding why people were not getting some things . . . until I understood that actually we weren’t essentially talking about the same thing. When I was talking about the regional community outcomes or local outcome or goal, I meant something quite different, you know, from what others’ were meaning.

Members were unclear about how to differentiate local and regional outcomes. Dialogue on these issues became increasingly complex. They started finding it “really difficult” to collaborate. They were finding it “difficult to keep track of who’s at what level” in the sustainability drive. Some members identified that one of their main problems “was that even though [they] were talking to each other, [they] were often talking past each other.” It seemed to them that they were speaking in different languages. They “were using same words, but with different meanings.”

Some members became highly impatient because they expected to see tangible outcomes immediately. They wanted action without spending further time planning. One member mentioned she was “always tempted to go off, and do, rather than plan to do.” The collaboration frustrated most of them—it seemed like “a hell of a lot of talking.” They believed that “very little that makes any difference [was coming] from it.” They felt they had “wasted a lot of energy” trying to resolve confusion. Some saw the “biggest barrier was the time pressure.” They worried what the “collaboration [was] costing, in terms of [everyone’s] time.” Some even started thinking “about pulling out of the collaboration” as it “was taking more time than they probably felt they had.” Additionally, some members, especially those representing “slower” local authorities, seemed to be nervous and frustrated about the competition they were facing from the “faster” local authorities. They were under pressure to catch up but could see it was not going to be easy to do so.

Experiencing Interorganizational Politics

Members were keen, however, to achieve certain concrete outcomes from the collaboration. They needed a solution “that was acceptable to their organization and executives.” They realized that collaboration was a very “political process.” One member shared,

It is just about the difference there, the politics, the tension of politics between different councils based on having different cultures, different outcomes, different expectations, and different goals. There is certainly a tension in there!

Political features of the collaboration emerged especially strongly when members had to produce a joint publication. There were political disagreements among members about the difference between regional sustainability and local sustainability outcomes. The member from the regional authority shared a view on the other local authorities. They tended to have

an overriding view that the regional community outcomes were no more than the sum of local outcomes. At the regional council, when we started thinking about that, we saw different dimensions. We saw the perspective of taking a “regional” approach as opposed to “sum of the local” approaches. I think that particular aspect has been a challenge—probably the biggest challenge all the way through.

The publication, which highlighted the sustainable development efforts of all the local authorities in the region and announced their collaboration and the rationale behind it, also included a mail-in community survey form. From the survey, members aimed to “gain an understanding of regional residents’ perspectives on what they want for themselves and their children now and in the future.” The production and distribution of the publication involved a “very tight time line with many nonnegotiable deadlines” as the local authorities planned to incorporate outcomes identified from the survey in their respective long-term sustainability plans.

The regional authority project leader, who was also a member of the collaboration, was managing the joint publication. Members gave input and feedback as they “collectively” developed the publication. The project leader “was then trying to align the feedback with what [the regional authority] could live with, as well.” The final joint publication had to satisfy everyone. However, not everyone was satisfied with the drafting process or the publication. Some were not pleased about the amount of time they had to work on the draft. They complained that the regional authority did not give them “enough time to discuss the complex issues.” The “timing was too short.” “Meetings were arranged at short notice and did not always have the same people in attendance.” Some members complained they were “not happy with the publication” because it seemed to primarily serve the purpose of the regional authority. They felt that such an approach was against the spirit of true collaboration. One member shared during the interview,

The survey questionnaire could have been useful, but it didn’t ask for the sort of things we wanted! . . . I just felt that it did not have a lot of validity. . . . It was very much balanced toward middle-aged, older, white, middle-class, sort of person who would make submissions to the Annual Plan, but not probably the

person in the street. . . . It wasn't particularly representative of our community. . . . I felt the questions were very based around the regional authority's environmental focus. It didn't really cover the things that we might have wanted to know. It was quite closed!

All members were simultaneously dealing with other political pressures within their organizations. They had to obtain consent from elected councilors and senior managers of their local authorities. "A huge number of sign-offs" were needed before finalizing and distributing the publication to the community. The publication had to be politically acceptable and organizationally feasible in terms of what it promised. Thus, "getting various things right and pulling those together were all the more political." Such considerations resulted in delays and "made things difficult." Members were very frustrated and dissatisfied with the seemingly time-consuming autocratic process and the bureaucracy involved. "The result was not entirely satisfactory." One member complained,

We had an objective to get a publication out, to every household, in a very short timeframe! That did not allow us to anywhere near a decent job. I would not have called that publication—and this is my personal view—as essentially good practice. We had a ridiculously short time frame!

The project leader confessed during her interview that she could feel the "dissonance amongst the project team." She felt she had no choice but to "fall back on some quite strong, maybe autocratic processes, to actually get things moving, and to drive it on a time frame." She had to get "most of the work done that year." She, therefore, had "put a very tight time frame in place and negotiated with everyone, every step, as to whether or not they would agree with that." In taking this approach, she feared "a very strong risk that [the members] might end up not owning the project—and that they might pull out, halfway through."

Dissatisfaction with the publication process deepened some members' prejudices against the regional authority. They expressed their lack of confidence in and heightened skepticism about working collaboratively for regional sustainability. One member questioned the "credibility" of the collaboration. Asking whether it was a "poor process or was it intent," this member wondered whether the regional authority deliberately used time as a means to manipulate the course of collaboration. Some members said that they found the whole experience of working collaboratively on the publication, a "waste of time." Furthermore, there were some members who felt threatened during the collaboration. Ironically, they were the ones whose organizations were further ahead in the sustainability mission. Some considered that they had "given more and gotten less" from the collaboration. One member was worried that by sharing his organizational experiences, he may have been enabling other inexperienced local authorities to become wiser and more experienced than his organization. During the interview, he questioned the value of the collaboration, saying, "OK Are we going to get any value out of participating in this? Or were they just going to be, you know,

trying to get value from us?" The threatened member stated, "We hope that they don't steal away all our ideas."

Compromising for Organizational Good

For most participants, the collaboration appeared to turn out all right in the end. It met its initial objectives. The local authorities jointly identified the regional community outcomes and put in place a collaborative monitoring process. Despite their differences, confusion, and frustration, and despite the politics and distrust, all members stayed involved. One pointed out,

I think things have to be really bad for us to say OK we are just going to withdraw from it. We want to work with other [local authorities] in the region. . . . Central government is kind of taking a much more regionally focused approach to engagement. So, we have got to try and make it work as well.

Another member said,

I think that the collaboration was a way of getting some "runs on the board"—showing that we could do some things together, in a tight timeframe, and come out with a worthwhile outcome.

Members also noted that they continued collaborating because they were accountable to their local authority that was further accountable to central government. One member stated, "There is some imperative to be involved in it because you are legally bound to be. Maybe, we are trying hard to be involved in it, because we have to!" One of their strategic documents reiterated the pressure they also faced from their community.

The community stakeholders' survey revealed that residents of the region were concerned about "lack of planning and integration at local government" and that "local governments work in isolation" and suggested that the region required "leadership by council" and a "shared vision."

However, to reach a shared vision, there was general agreement that "there was lot of compromise, in everybody trying to agree." Members realized that they "could not wait for the perfect timing" to collaborate, as "there will never be perfect timing." Some admitted a lack of resources prevented them from collectively developing a strong process for their first sustainability plans. Others took a pragmatic "long-term benefits view," seeing sustainable development as "a change process" that is "very slow, very time-consuming, and requires robust relationships." They acknowledged their collaboration was a relationship-building process. However, building relationships "required lot of patience."

Members accepted collaboration was hard. Some wanted to give more attention to this collaboration and build those relationships. However, they could not—because “most of them did not have the personnel resource” to actively participate in the collaboration. They were “all very busy.” Their calendars were full. Some mentioned that they “had been [so] busy lately with [their organization’s] local community outcomes [process]” that they could not regularly attend the meetings.

Even though members realized that the collaboration was “very expensive on time and resources” and that they were not fully satisfied with the collaboration, they celebrated their achievements. They were pleased that, despite their disagreements, they could collectively prepare the joint publication. They could successfully conduct the regional survey by the deadline. In one of the meetings, the project leader pointed to the time line on the screen and said, enthusiastically, “Well, seeing the time line, we reached there!” Everyone cheered.

Members acknowledged that without much collaborative experience, they were bound to have “teething problems.” It was expected at the beginning that the new legislation “would change radically how decisions might be made and priorities set.” As they collaborated, members also realized that sometimes “things do not change that fast in relation to moving toward target.” One may be able to “see incremental change,” if one is “lucky.” They admitted that often “things remain static too.” Members reminded one another that “the system and the councils [were] still learning.” One member highlighted,

It’s early days—community outcomes presents lots of challenges—working with central government and working regionally, locally. It’s going to take a long time to unravel. It’s better to be realistic about what can be achieved in the first time around. It’s kind of “give and take” and “live and learn” . . . yeah!

It was accepted that the changes would be “incremental and probably minimal in this round” of planning. This phase of these local authorities’ collaboration concluded without a lot of its initial excitement around sustainability or talk of high hopes for the future. However, its members had surely met the prescribed initial objectives for this collaboration—and that was what seemed to matter to them the most. The regional outcomes identified by the joint survey were formally agreed and accepted by all the eight local authorities in their local and regional sustainability planning processes.

A Critical-Interpretive Account of Interorganizational Collaboration for Sustainability

In this section, we integrate the themes from the above narrative and offer a critical-interpretive account of interorganizational collaboration for sustainability. We interpret the obvious meanings of the collaboration. We dig deeper into those meanings and expose the latent meanings, below the “surface texts,” to identify inconsistencies, contradictions, and conflicts within the process.

We begin the discussion by raising a fundamental question. What was the collaboration about? Our analysis reveals that it was not just about different local authorities in the region meeting each other to collectively devise instrumental plans on sustainable development. As others have found in their research (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000; Gray, 1985, 1989), this collaboration was also an emergent organizing process of change and relationship building among members. Through the collaboration, members representing different local authorities were trying to communicatively rationalize their individual and collective position and perspectives on the new legislation and sustainable development and develop a “communicative understanding,” as promoted by Habermas (1987). This process of relationship building was taking place in an interorganizational relational space and was subject to regulatory pressures on sustainable development from a higher level government authority as well as normative pressures from the community.

We now respond to the first question raised in our introduction. How do institutional mandates influence the dynamics of the collaboration? Our analysis shows that institutions related to sustainability motivated local authorities to collaborate for sustainability. Regulative and normative institutions related to sustainability by and large framed that logic. Local authorities faced regulative pressures through the LGA 2002. They had to conform to legislative demands and central government expectations related to sustainable development, including those on interorganizational collaboration. They feared that if they did not conform to those expectations, they would face various sanctions. They also faced normative pressures from regional stakeholders. They were worried about their tarnished reputation with the local community. They wanted to improve it. They feared greater distrust and alienation from stakeholders if they did not “appear” to be doing the right things or engaging in best practices toward sustainability. Moreover, local authorities were also facing various resource and temporal pressures because of the new legislative environment. They lacked sufficient resources, including staff, finances, and time to understand and efficiently implement changes that would cater to some of those regulatory and normative expectations. They wanted to use resources optimally. They hoped that by collaborating, they would share knowledge and skills related to sustainable development. They hoped to collectively mobilize their resources for this social change. They hoped that, in the process, they would not only save time; they would also become effective and efficient in their individual missions. The members were reasonable in harboring positive expectations from their collaboration, as collaborations in general offer such promises, as discussed earlier in this article. Thus, subjected to intense regulative and normative institutional pressures, the local authorities engaged in collaboration.

We now discuss the next research question. What challenges does the pursuit of sustainability goals pose for collaborative initiatives? Our analysis reveals that the pursuit of sustainability entailed various challenges during the collaboration. Despite realizing that there were potential benefits of engaging in an interorganizational collaboration to meet their respective sustainability goals, members of the collaboration regarded it as a problematic encounter. The problems they experienced arose for three main reasons: (a) there were organizational-level differences on sustainable development

among members, (b) individual members were not well prepared and resourced to deal with the demands of collaboration, and (c) there were problems emerging in the collaboration because of the complexity inherent in the sustainable development philosophy. In our subsequent discussion of these reasons, we reiterate that the context for sustainable development influenced the collaborative process as well as its outcomes, as also indicated by Sharfman, Gray, and Yan (1991).

There were organizational-level differences among the local authorities. Even though the local authorities confronted similar regulative and normative institutional pressures related to sustainable development, their experiences and behaviors within the field, with respect to sustainability, were not similar. They were organizations with different cultures. They had adopted different disciplinary foci within sustainability. They were at different stages of involvement in the sustainability mission. They had different priorities on environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

The study also revealed that the local authorities were operating with different time lines and had developed different senses of urgency toward solving problems on those different sustainability fronts. They also had acquired different paces in developing and implementing policies on sustainable development of their respective communities. They differed in their organizational resources, knowledge, skills, and capabilities to institutionalize sustainable development.

With their various differences, members entered into the collaboration with different understandings, hopes, and beliefs related to sustainability and the collaboration. They began engaging by conceptually exploring the topic of sustainable development. Their conceptual exploration of sustainable development was complex and invoked the need to consider various different but interrelated elements, as summarized in Table 1.

The members of this collaboration sought clarification on the new legislative requirements and articulated their understandings. Some were reluctant to give much time deliberating these aspects and coming to agreement on them. At times, members struggled to understand each other. The process of learning, cocreating (Roome & Wijen, 2005), and sense making (Vlaar et al., 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) was extremely difficult and time-consuming. It was laden with internal tensions, contradictions, and confusions. We do not hold the members fully responsible for generating and experiencing such negative outcomes. The members did not fully understand what the new regulatory requirements meant in practice. They did not know the best way to plan for and implement regional and local sustainability. They did not get clear directives from central government either. Moreover, they were dealing with various ambiguous, ideological and conflict-provoking elements seen as inherent in the sustainable development philosophy (Dovers & Handmer, 1992; Hediger, 1999). There are many different, parallel, and constantly evolving debates on sustainable development (Dresner, 2002; Pearce & Barbier, 2000) at global, national, regional, and local levels of society. One of the biggest ironies connected with sustainable development is that no one knows exactly what a sustainable future might look like or whether it is possible to achieve (Hawken, 1993). With so much ambiguity around the topic of sustainable development, it was unsurprising to find different views emerging on

Table 1. Sustainable Development Considerations During Collaborations for Regional Sustainability

International, interregional, interlocal, and interorganizational politics on sustainable development
National legislation and regional and local practice around sustainable development
Growth and the need for infrastructural planning and development
Meaning of <i>economic sustainability</i> and the achievement of economic well-being
Meaning of <i>social sustainability</i> and the achievement of social well-being
Meaning of <i>environmental sustainability</i> and the achievement of environmental well-being
Meaning of <i>sustainability</i> as an integrative concept and simultaneous prioritization of the three sustainability pillars during planning
Need for changes in organizational culture and mission

community outcomes (reflecting different prioritizing of the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainable development). Members also demonstrated that they had different temporal ideas about sustainable development, ranging from long-term to short-term orientations. They also had varying expectations ranging from slow to fast-paced social transformations and radical or more modest changes related to achieving the various sustainable community outcomes.

In addition to the fragmented identity of sustainable development, which we also recognize as one of the biggest problems of these kinds of collaborations, members were engaging with others who differed in terms of the skills needed for collaboration. Individual differences were abundantly apparent even though members were all from the same sector and held relatively similar positions in their local authorities. Individual members demonstrated varying levels of patience and capacity to tolerate organizational- and individual-level differences and adjust to others. The differences in their individual personalities and organizational pace negatively influenced members' desire to communicate and understand each other's perspectives on sustainable development. Consequently, frustration and confusion were generated, which led some members to question the nature of their ongoing involvement.

Members needed to synchronize their different organizational paces to collaborate. Hoping to settle emerging dissonance and meet their objectives, they developed certain temporal agreements (Ballard & Seibold, 2003; Hassard, 1996) such as the combined time line and the joint publication deadline. However, some members, especially those who had previous experiences with, and prejudices against other local authorities, viewed their "forced" temporal agreements as mechanisms of manipulation and control. Instead of clearing confusion, those tight time frames introduced skepticism and delays and, hence, more frustration and conflict during the collaboration.

Table 2 summarizes problems in implementing sustainable development (identified in the first column) that further complicate and heighten the problematic dynamics of collaboration and appeared, in the case studied, to make the process of collaborating so difficult.

Table 2. Problems in Implementing Interorganizational Collaborations for Sustainability

Problems in Implementing Sustainable Development	Problems in Implementing Interorganizational Collaborations	Problems in Implementing Interorganizational Collaborations for Sustainability
<p>Tension between intergenerational and intragenerational sustainable development</p> <p>Multiplicity and complexities of local and/or regional sustainability issues related to economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability</p> <p>Ambiguities around measurement of achievement of sustainability</p> <p>Difficulty in integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability</p>	<p><i>Power and politics</i></p> <p>Power differences because of members' differences in knowledge, status, and resource base</p> <p>Tendency toward preservation of self-interest</p> <p>Lack of "real" commitment to the collaboration</p> <p>Resistance and conflict</p> <p><i>Distrust of others in the collaboration</i></p> <p>Perceived nonneutral convener</p> <p>Threat of competition from members</p> <p>Negative collaboration history</p> <p>Prejudices toward other organizations</p> <p><i>Ineffective and inefficient communication</i></p> <p>Lack of resources, including time, individual member commitment, and information for the collaboration</p> <p>Members' predominant adoption of a task focus as opposed to a communicative focus because of increased workload and pressure</p>	<p>Competing organizational interests and priorities on economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability for the short and longer term</p> <p>Differences in organizational visions of regional and/or local sustainability</p> <p>Different levels of organizational commitment toward sustainability</p> <p>Differences in organizational expectations of collaboration for sustainability</p> <p>Different levels of organizational knowledge and experience in sustainability planning and implementation</p> <p>Different organizational pace in the movement toward sustainability</p> <p>Lack of common vocabulary on sustainability</p>

We now discuss the third research question: How can organizations involved in sustainable development work to best realize the promise of collaboration? We argue that they need to have realistic expectations about what can be achieved through collaboration, and we discuss the apparent benefits in this case. Our analysis reveals that, despite the various challenges that members experienced in the process, they thought

the collaboration proved beneficial, to some extent, for sustainable development. It helped them meet some of their expectations and learn more about sustainable development and their region. They were able to express their concerns and confusion about the new regulation and around sustainable development. They often mentioned the enormous challenges their organizations faced in the past. They shared some of their experiences and listened to others' accounts. They spoke of problems their organizations may face in future with respect to sustainable development of their communities. Most members acknowledged that their collaboration was not just about achieving sustainability. It was also about building relationships with other local authorities and stakeholders in the region. They acknowledged that from seeing people during the collaboration, they had established very good relationships with some members. They also started learning how to relate to each other with respect to their individual, organizational, and collective roles in the sustainability mission of the region. Members considered good relationships a very positive spin-off that could help them save time—now and in the future—and help their organizations take faster strides toward sustainability. In summary, the collaboration provided members with opportunities to learn about the topic of sustainable development in the current context and in relation to past experience. Building relationships and “learning how to relate to each other” (Kitchen et al., 1997, p. 657) are other important and widely recognized benefits of collaboration (Innes, 1999; Poncelet, 2001), also noted here.

Another positive outcome of this collaboration was that it endured and met its initial objectives. Even though the collaboration did not meet everyone's expectations, members continued to collaborate. Strong regulative pressures played a crucial role in sustaining the motivation and commitment of members and their organizations toward the process. Coercive influences bonded the members, to some extent. They “hung in” with each other despite their apparent negative feelings about the process. Despite the misunderstandings and dissatisfaction, members continued giving their time to the process. Collaboration was mandated and, to some extent, their jobs—even as permanent appointees—depended on it. Their local authorities could not afford a failed collaboration, especially when the region was so strategically important. Central government had pinned huge expectations on these local authorities collaborating for regional sustainability. The local authorities had to meet the requirements of the LGA 2002. They did not have attractive escape options. At the very least, the local authorities had to appear responsive toward the collaboration to sustain their own legitimacy. The members also needed to show they were upholding the responsibilities inherent in their jobs. Organizations involved in sustainable development are thus shown to benefit from institutional pressures that focus attention on particular collaborative tasks. Table 3 summarizes some of the potential benefits of collaboration for sustainability, as apparent in the case studied.

Members of this collaboration noted that, in the end, they were willing to compromise to make the collaboration succeed. There was little choice but to find a common ground—albeit not a radical one—that served the basic objectives of the collaboration and also satisfied, to a greater or lesser extent, the central government officials, the

Table 3. Potential Benefits of Interorganizational Collaboration for Sustainability

Collaborative Dimensions of Sustainable Development	Potential Benefits of Collaboration	Potential Benefits of Interorganizational Collaboration for Sustainability
Integration of national, regional, and local sustainability Integration of economic, social, and environmental sustainability Interorganizational and cross-sectoral engagement for implementation of sustainable development	Learning	Enhanced understanding of the sustainability regulations and requirements Critical understanding of various pressures and urgency of sustainable development More realistic expectations of institutional change Enhanced understanding of other actors' efforts in the social drive toward sustainability Exposure to other organization's sustainability culture, visions and missions Enhanced vocabulary and communication skills on sustainability
Integration of intragenerational and intergenerational sustainability framework	Relationship building	New and deeper relationships with stakeholders for sustainability Reduction of power differences in relation to sustainability Development of positive collaborative spirit around sustainability
	Joint problem solving	Insights into new problem-solving approaches on various sustainability issues
	Joint innovations and value creation	Integrated development of regional and local sustainability policies and practices Integrated development of economic, environmental, and social sustainability policies and practices
	Efficiency Resource sharing Cost saving	Greater ability to achieve sustainability outcomes that cross-cut different disciplinary, geographic and organizational boundaries More efficient means of engaging with regional citizen stakeholders
	Capacity building and survival	Greater legitimacy and reputation with respect to sustainable development of the community Greater capacity to withstand sustainability pressures Greater capacity to initiate regional- and local-level changes on sustainability

elected councilors in each local authority involved in the collaboration, and the community stakeholders. In essence, our analysis showed sustainable development as an ongoing process that is complex—and organizations involved in collaborations as seeking and deriving outcomes of mutual benefit such as relationships, learning, and increased legitimacy. These outcomes may lead toward sustainable development but do not necessarily substitute for some of the harder decisions and radical changes that are required to achieve holistic sustainability based on the three-pillar model. Individuals and organizations going into collaboration should thus harbor realistic expectations about what can be accomplished, particularly within very short time frames.

Conclusion

This article draws attention to the potential and problems in interorganizational collaboration for sustainability through an examination of one such collaboration among local authorities working toward regional sustainability. The implications for theory, practice, and further research are noted below.

The article explicates emerging theory that collaboration can potentially solve problems of unsustainable development, but it should not be seen as a panacea. There are three linked arguments here. First, collaboration offers different organizational representatives the opportunities to meet, share their ideas, explore and implement new approaches to sustainability, and develop important relationships and capabilities that aid in the mutual achievement of their sustainability mission. Second, the perception of interorganizational collaboration as an effective and efficient mechanism to achieve sustainability is idealistic and perhaps overly simplistic. Third, interorganizational collaborations for sustainability, in practice, and as seen in our study, can be highly complex and communicatively distorted processes of engagement.

The implications of this argument for theory are important given that the sustainable development philosophy provides a powerful rationale for interorganizational collaboration and change efforts. This article explains how difficult an integrated focus on the three sustainability pillars can be—even within a single sector where collaborative processes and outcomes were mandated. It sheds light on the fluid and “human” nature of interorganizational collaborations for sustainability and explains how various aspects of the sustainable development philosophy, including some of the inherent ambiguities (Thomson et al., 2009) and complexities, influence the emergence and development of such processes and organizational change favoring sustainability. It explains how asymmetries in resource, information, and expertise (Vlaar et al., 2006), with respect to planning for and implementing regional sustainability, can influence members’ sense making and collaborative relationships. It also demonstrates the application of critical-interpretive methodology in collaboration research—an approach that has not been widely adopted by collaboration scholars as noted by Cropper, Ebers, Huxham, and Ring (2008a) and Lotia and Hardy (2008).

Problems experienced in collaboration for sustainability are exposed and discussed in terms of their practical implications. These problems include organizational differences on sustainability, resource and time constraints on the part of organizations and individuals, and complexities inherent in sustainable development as a holistic philosophy and in the attempts to prioritize one or other of the three pillars rather than work across all three. Even more apparent is that collaboration on such grounds can invoke politics, distrust, and conflict and ultimately turn out to be an inefficient, confusing, and frustrating encounter. Confronting various problems, organizational representatives may compromise on fairly easy or abstract solutions for organizational good rather than serve the wider remit of sustainable development. Those solutions may help organizations maintain their own legitimacy, but they may not contribute greatly toward the radical, long-term, and far-reaching solutions deemed necessary for sustainability (Dryzek, 1997; Ehrenfeld, 1999; Shrivastava & Hart, 1995; Welford, 1998). We warn that, if ineffective and inefficient, interorganizational collaborations may disinterest and disengage organizations and individuals. Experiencing various problems and complexities in these processes may even dampen their enthusiasm for, and their level of collective engagement in, the social change toward sustainability. On the basis of our research, we argue for tempered enthusiasm and realistic expectations around such engagement.

We offer the following practical recommendations for policy agencies and other organizations aiming to design collaborations for sustainable development. To ensure that such collaborative processes are more effective and efficient, conveners of the collaboration should clearly demarcate time, at the beginning of the process, to discuss and develop a shared understanding of sustainable development. They should raise and find answers to the following issues: (a) what members individually understand by sustainable development, (b) whether and in what manner their organization gives different priority to the three pillars of sustainability, (c) what then should their collective understanding of sustainable development be, and (d) how they should integrate across the three pillars of sustainability. They should also develop a minidictionary or reference list of key sustainability terms they have been using in their organization, which has become a part of their vocabulary. They should share that list with all the members. They should then spend some time to collectively develop a list of common terminologies they will use in their deliberations during meetings. Those terms should ideally become a part of their “collaborative vocabulary” to be used in the strategy and policy manuals that they will develop. Once such agreements are in place, facilitators should then focus on further structuring and implementing the collaboration. Conveners should be clear on how much time members should devote to discussing about sustainable development and how much time they should allocate to finalizing the process-based issues of the collaboration. They should discuss and agree on the basic objectives and broad goals of their collaboration. Importantly, conveners need to manage time. They should encourage members to share their expectations of the collaboration and tell everyone prior to the commencement of the collaboration what kind of resources, including the amount of time, they need to commit.

Although the above initial steps may prove challenging, given some members' likely desire for actions that are concrete, or for faster progress from the outset, some early discussions on time lines may also be helpful. If conveners can manage these issues effectively and efficiently and early on in the process, then they could well lay a stronger foundation for the collaboration. There may be fewer sources of potential confusion and frustration among members at a later stage. It is also important, where possible, that a neutral convener of the collaboration be chosen. Even though the collaboration may be hosted by an agency that has the most resources or has the mandate to organize such collaborations, members may consider electing a convener who they consider is most trustworthy or skilled. If members can come to such agreements, then they may be able to dedicate more time and effort to other important matters. These include deliberating and devising long-term solutions that are deeper, radical, and essential to institutionalize sustainable development as well as communicating to the organizations they represent the benefits they are accruing from the collaboration as well as the problems they are facing, both with respect to regional sustainability and collaborating for it. There is the potential for learning to extend beyond the members and to penetrate much deeper into the organizations themselves.

In offering these practical recommendations on interorganizational collaborations for sustainability, we recognize our findings relate to only a single collaboration. This is a limitation of our research. However, in presenting a worthy cautionary tale of an actual collaboration, we have underscored the potential of such collaboration as well as offered insights into the actual problems that were experienced in collaborating for sustainability. Those insights could be relevant to other interorganizational collaborations for sustainability as well—and further research involving other cases is recommended. Another limitation of this study is that we were not able to follow the progression of the collaboration to the next phase because the time and permission granted to us to carry out the research had expired. We were therefore not able to investigate how the collaboration further unfolded, over a longer period, as members collectively explored and developed a new set of sustainability goals for their region. Observing and investigating the process, for example, over a 2 to 3 year period, would have helped to identify additional potentials and challenges involved in such processes.

Given the extent of the sustainability challenge before us, longitudinal research on some of the significant collaborations taking place on a global and national scale in different country contexts will be especially important to decide whether and, if so, precisely how collaborations can institutionalize sustainable development. Further research that looks at collaboration for sustainability beyond its process dimensions, to consider tangible outcomes in conjunction with actual implementation efforts toward the achievement of sustainability, is also required.

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