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## Collaborative Planning and Equity

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# Collaborative Planning + Equity

## Introduction

Planning decisions have an effect on all who share an urban environment, but the processes and outcomes that precede these implications are not practiced through the lens of equity and inclusion. Our research on collaborative planning and equity attempts to understand how collaborative planning and policy decisions are made, and to pinpoint where an equity lens might transform normative procedures into a practice of anti-oppression, agonism, and advocacy.

Collaborative planning is a dominant theory in planning in which multiple stakeholders come together to deliberate on common concerns and apply consensus building and public participation methods to make policy decisions. The approach seeks to balance power among participants and increase public engagement. Scholars of collaborative planning have developed evaluative frameworks to inform and improve theory and practice. The frameworks function as guides for achieving successful collaborations. Some scholars have focused on the considerations and behaviors that lead to agreements with high levels of support or pathways to implementation. Others may have emphasized practices that build organizational capacity, trust, or shared knowledge among participants as a measure of success. Whether seeking high-quality plans or strengthening collaborative networks, these frameworks rarely discussed equity and inclusion in ways that support equitable processes and outcomes.

Our work integrates and synthesizes seven frameworks from the collaborative planning literature to understand how previous evaluations have approached collaborative planning, and to identify where they have failed to consider equity and inclusion. This briefing provides insight into the framework integration with a focus on where guidance on equity and inclusion is present and, more often, where it is lacking.

## Framework Integration

Integration and synthesis of the seven frameworks produced three key stages in collaborative planning: *Framing Context*, *Process and Implementation*, and *Process Outcomes*. Each stage has multiple elements that identify key areas to measure for the success for collaborative practices. These elements entail a series of questions that practitioners or scholars can ask to guide and evaluate their processes and outcomes.

## Framing Context

We approach collaborative planning with the belief that collaboration does not occur in a vacuum. Collaboration may emerge through political or legal mandate, through organizing, or other political and economic situation in which multiple stakeholders work together to make

decisions. Depending on the context, tensions may exist between collaborators, or lack of trust may be present. The conditions under which each collaboration is initiated brings pre-existing tensions and relationships into the deliberative space. Collaborators and participants each have expectations and responsibilities when forming a collaborative initiative. The resources needed to support collaborative arrangements also need to be in place prior to any formal processes. The integrated framing context (Table 1) presented three elements to consider at the outset of collaborative engagements: the political and economic environment, the attributes and responsibilities of each participant, and the resources available.

These early considerations stressed the need for inclusion in stakeholder representation, with the selection of participants determined by the convener(s). Authors encouraged the participation of groups often unrepresented in decision making processes, and sought attributes such as interdependency, willingness to compromise, and ability to commit on behalf of stakeholder organization. Diverse representation was held as an indicator of good collaborative processes, and was measured by the range of ideas, knowledge, and groups represented.

**Table 1. Framing Context**

I.A Understand the political and economic environment in which organization and plan operate (for successful and efficient collaborations)
1 <i>What are the reasons for collaboration?</i>
2 <i>What experience do participants have with collaborative processes?</i>
3 <i>What is the political will of stakeholders?</i>
4 <i>Do stakeholders practice reflexive capacity?</i>
5 <i>Is a convener(s) committed to inviting additional stakeholders and hosting meetings?</i>
I.B Determine the attributes and responsibilities of convening and non-convening organizations
1 <i>Which attributes do conveners seek in participant selection?</i>
2 <i>How are participants selected?</i>
I.C Identify the availability of resources
1 <i>What is the investment commitment of supporting organizations?</i>
2 <i>How is information sharing coordinated and delivered?</i>

## Process Design & Implementation

Collaborative processes are designed and managed throughout the deliberative and decision making process, and well as through implementation of plans or agreements. This stage asks conveners and practitioners to choose how decisions were made, how to participate actively, as well as what diversity and inclusion look like in practice. Four elements of consideration emerge in the integrated framework in the area of process design and implementation: democratic quality, knowledge and learning, the convener(s) role, and evaluation and monitoring (Table 2).

Democratic quality concerns the practice of decision making, such as whether a consensus building technique is valued, and what normative expectations stakeholders have about participation. Diversity and inclusion were considered in the frameworks through the evaluation of democratic quality, which included evaluating the adequacy of representation, which modes of participation were used, and whether practices of tolerance and reciprocity were employed. Meaningful participation – when participants feel that their involvement has an influence on the decision – was also a matter of democratic quality that indicated good and inclusive processes.

Additional elements rarely considered issues of equity and inclusion, or their evaluations were not identified in those terms. For instance, frameworks that valued learning and knowledge promoted the integration of local knowledge, or a balance of local and expert knowledge. The role of conveners was measured by the ability of the process facilitator to sustain broad participation, and the meeting facilitator’s ability to manage power dynamics during deliberations. Frameworks approached evaluation and monitoring as well, suggesting that collaboratives reflect on the success of the process and implementation, with some frameworks asking that stakeholders be able to trace where local knowledge was clearly integrated into the plan or agreement.

**Table 2. Process Design and Implementation**

II.A Understand the democratic quality of the collaborative process
1 <i>How is decision making be practiced?</i>
2 <i>What role will consensus take in decision making practices?</i>
3 <i>What are the expectations for active participation?</i>
4 <i>How does the process engage with diversity and practice inclusion?</i>
II.B Engage in learning and knowledge production through relationship building
1 <i>How does collaboration support learning?</i>
2 <i>What shared knowledge is developed through collaboration?</i>
II.C Clarify and reinforce the role of convening organization(s)
1 <i>What are the roles of process facilitator(s)?</i>
2 <i>What are the roles of the meeting facilitator(s)?</i>
II.D Evaluate and monitor processes and outcomes
1 <i>How do participants practice monitoring and evaluation?</i>

## Process Outcomes

After deliberation and decision making practices conclude, collaborative planning frameworks turn toward the evaluation of short and long-term outcomes (Table 3). Agreements or plans are commonly short-term outcomes of collaborative planning, and each come with their own set of roles and responsibilities around funding, management, and implementation. Long-term outcomes often refer to relationships among participants and the ways learning and knowledge

become institutionalized within participant organizations. Relationships may be strengthened across collaborative networks, or participating organizations may experience an increase in capacity to engage in future collaborations, work with government partners, or partner with fellow collaborative participant organizations. The integrated process outcomes evaluate three elements: plans, participant satisfaction, and implications on participant organizations.

Frameworks evaluating short and long-term outcomes largely considered equity in terms of distribution of benefits and harms as implicated in plans or agreements. This element is the only clear space in which equity is named as an evaluation measure.

Participant satisfaction was measured by the levels of participation expected by each participant, and whether those expectations were met. The frameworks also questioned whether adequate space and time was set aside for a diversity of participatory methods. In addition, evaluations of network capacity considered whether participants were more equipped to engage in future collaborations. Beyond individual impacts, frameworks evaluated whether participants gained stronger relationships between one another, as well as whether a shared knowledge was gained through their interactions. Outcomes that changed participant behavior and organizational discourse as a result of shared knowledge was held as an indicator of good collaborative processes.

**Table 3. Process Outcomes**

III.A Understand how plans are utilized and valued
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 <i>What makes implementation successful?</i></li> <li>2 <i>How are participants held accountable to their commitments?</i></li> <li>3 <i>Are strategies innovative?</i></li> <li>4 <i>Are agreements of high quality?</i></li> <li>5 <i>What goals are achieved?</i></li> <li>6 <i>Are outcomes equitable?</i></li> </ol>
III.B Understand satisfaction with collaborative processes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 <i>Are participants satisfied with the process?</i></li> <li>2 <i>Did participants continuously participate?</i></li> <li>3 <i>Were the impacts of participation on outcomes communicated?</i></li> <li>4 <i>Were opportunities to participate adequate?</i></li> <li>5 <i>Was the collaboration cost-effective?</i></li> </ol>
III.C Understand how collaboration impacts participating organizations
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 <i>Does involvement in the process increase participant organization(s) capacity for future engagement?</i></li> <li>2 <i>Does engagement produce stronger collaborative networks?</i></li> <li>3 <i>Do participants demonstrate shared knowledge gains?</i></li> </ol>

## Conclusion

Consideration of equity and inclusion across the integrated framework elements was limited. Our preliminary research suggests that an equity lens needs to be applied across all stages of the integrated framework. Applying an equity lens may take scholars and practitioners beyond acknowledging the importance of diverse representation, seeking the inclusion of local knowledge, or evaluating equity in the distribution of benefits and harms. An equity lens can bring attention to the ways in which equity and inclusion can confront convener and participant assumptions, recognize inequality, and approach power in ways that value the position of affected communities. Institutionalizing an equity lens in both theory and practice offers an alternative to collaborative planning norms that reproduce systems of oppression, injustice, and inequity. Our research continues to seek ways to guide scholars and practitioners in applying an equity lens in every collaborative process.

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