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Public innovation in regional collaborative governance: An analysis of public actors' perceptions in a subnational program of environmental sustainability and inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Public innovation has become an imperative for the contemporary state, driving governance models that shift the focus from hierarchical centrality toward public–private partnerships. This research aims to analyze public officials' perceptions of the implementation of the "Pact for a Sustainable and Inclusive Region" in the Los Lagos Region, Chile, highlighting their experiences during the process, as well as the catalysts and barriers it encountered. The study adopts a qualitative exploratory case study approach, utilizing document analysis and 22 semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, following a hybrid approach that integrates deductive categories from the literature on public innovation and collaborative governance with emergent categories derived from participants' narratives. The main findings reveal that, while collaborative governance acts as an integrating framework that generates social capital, trust, and mutual learning, its effectiveness is limited by significant constraints, including the burden of contingency planning placed on public sector employees, a lack of structural resources, and a high dependence on the incumbent political leadership. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that collaborative governance can constitute a relevant form of public innovation at the subnational level by facilitating dialogue, learning, and consensus-building processes among diverse actors; however, its long-term sustainability depends on the capacity to institutionalize these mechanisms, secure adequate resources, and reduce dependence on temporary political leadership.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the field of collaborative governance and public innovation by exploring public officials' perceptions of collaborative governance in subnational contexts. It provides new insights into their experiences during deliberative processes, as well as the barriers and facilitators they observed in the implementation of these public innovation policy processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, public innovation has consolidated as a key concept that has become an imperative for the State and a priority area of reflection within contemporary public management (Bran-Piedrahita, Valencia-Arias, Palacios-Moya, & Arias-Vargas, 2023; Desmarchelier, Djellal, & Gallouj, 2019; Liarte, Criado, & Alcaide-Muñoz, 2024). This growing political and academic interest emerges in a context characterized by institutional

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pressures to transform public services toward more innovative and adaptive models (Borins, 2010; Osborne et al., 2020; Osborne & Brown, 2011). One manifestation of this innovative drive is the emergence of new forms of public–private partnerships that shift the focus of public intervention away from the centrality of the State toward more collaborative processes. Within the framework of Collaborative Governance (CG), an institutional commitment emerges in which one or more government entities formally incorporate diverse actors into a deliberative and consensual decision-making process. This formal process aims at the design or implementation of public policies or programs, as well as the management of shared resources (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Driven by the paradigms of traditional public administration, New Public Management, and New Public Governance, collaborative governance has gained prominence as a highly valued concept. The emergence of collaborative models can be explained by socio-political shifts that have redefined the role of the state, promoting public–private collaboration and addressing new demands for democratic legitimacy.

While scholarly literature and guidelines from international organizations have been prolific in promoting collaborative governance as a mechanism for public innovation, a persistent gap remains in the analysis of concrete, systematized, and evaluated experiences. There is limited knowledge about the depth of interagency relationships, as well as about the key constraints and lessons derived from the implementation of public policies and programs framed within collaborative governance models (Wang, Xiong, Wu, & Zhu, 2018). One of the least addressed issues concerns the perceptions of public officials themselves, who, under the principles of collaborative governance, delegate authority to other actors in civil society. How do they perceive this process? What are their perceptions of these participatory mechanisms? These are some of the questions this research seeks to address.

This study aims to address this deficit of empirical knowledge by analyzing concrete experiences of collaborative governance (CG) from the perspective of public officials who directly participated in a public program based on a public–private partnership approach in a region of southern Chile. This work also contributes to the evaluation of the public program process (Muñoz & Rivera-Mercado, 2024). In participatory processes, evaluation plays an important role in improving practice (Chess, 2000) and, consequently, in enhancing the quality of future processes (Kovács et al., 2017). Furthermore, evaluating participation in public deliberative spaces helps ensure that participating actors do not perceive public participation as merely symbolic (Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004). It is also important to understand how collaborative mechanisms impact society through specific theoretical models (Conley & Moote, 2003).

The study explores public officials' perceptions of specific experiences of collaborative governance in subnational systems, with particular emphasis on perceived catalysts and barriers. In this sense, the research articulates three specific contributions to the field of public innovation in political processes. First, it constitutes an empirical analysis that expands knowledge of contemporary forms of collaborative governance and public innovation from the local level. Despite the expansion and theoretical development of the literature on collaborative governance, significant gaps persist, particularly regarding empirical evidence, especially concerning the need to explore more deeply the substantive aspects of the problems addressed through collaboration and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the tensions inherent in collaborative processes (Waardenburg, Groenleer, de Jong, & Keijser, 2020).

Secondly, the study highlights the role of individuals as key agents who experience and implement innovation in public services (Demircioglu & Audretsch, 2020; Gullmark & Clausen, 2023). Given that these officials maintain direct contact with citizens and act as drivers of territorial development, understanding their perceptions is vital for strengthening the capacity to implement innovative strategies that are scalable and adaptable to diverse governance contexts (Bekkers, Edelenbos, & Steijn, 2011).

Finally, this research contributes to the geographical diversification of studies on public innovation in subnational governments, which have predominantly focused on North American and European contexts (Alcaide-Muñoz, Criado, & Liarte, 2026; Criado, Alcaide, & Liarte, 2023; Liarte et al., 2024; Walker, 2006). By situating the analysis in a different regional context, the external validity of governance and innovation theories is strengthened.

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The article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework underpinning the research is presented, framed within the concepts of collaborative governance and public innovation. The second section describes the main characteristics of the Pact for a Sustainable and Inclusive Region program, which constitutes the case study. Third, the methodological approach is presented. The fourth section presents and analyzes the results. The fifth section discusses the theoretical and empirical implications of the findings.

2. OBJECTIVE

To analyze public officials' perceptions of the implementation of collaborative governance experiences in subnational contexts, based on a case of a public program grounded in a public–private collaboration approach in southern Chile.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Collaborative Governance: From Regulatory Guidelines to the Analysis of Empirical Innovation Experiences

Currently, the formation of strategic alliances between the public and private sectors for the delivery of services and the implementation of projects has become an established global trend (OECD, 2024). This phenomenon reflects a profound reconfiguration of the role of the state in late modernity, shifting from hierarchical and direct control models toward governance arrangements (Aguilar, 2014, 2024). Within this new paradigm, decision-making is distributed across a complex network of diverse actors interacting at multiple levels (Ansell & Torfing, 2017; Newman, Barnes, Sullivan, & Knops, 2004; Torfing, Ferlie, Jukić, & Ongaro, 2021). In this context, governance emerges as a specific form of cooperation aimed at solving public problems through collective action.

Collaborative governance (CG) is defined as an institutional commitment in which one or more government entities formally incorporate diverse actors into a deliberative and consensual decision-making process. This formal process ultimately aims at the design or implementation of public policies, as well as the management of shared resources (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This approach promotes the active participation of civil society, the private sector, and subnational governments, shifting the focus toward the co-creation of public policies and services (Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez, 2021). Beyond its operational aspects, CG stands out for its potential to address complex challenges both in service delivery (Qi & Ran, 2024) and in formulating strategic responses to uncertain scenarios (Ansell & Torfing, 2017). Furthermore, the collaborative process has an inherent normative dimension: participation is not only a technical tool but also an essential mechanism for strengthening transparency and accountability in the public sector (Osborne, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2018).

The evolving role of the state in contemporary social configurations has spurred academic interest in analyzing these new governance arrangements. Over the past two decades, the field of public administration has promoted collaboration between the public and private sectors as the basis for collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bianchi, Nasi, & Rivenbark, 2021; Osborne, 2006). These efforts articulate management and decision-making structures and processes that integrate diverse stakeholder groups to achieve public policy objectives (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; Waardenburg et al., 2020), materializing what is known in the literature as the "collaborative advantage" (Doberstein, 2016). To ensure the quality of these models, it is imperative that participating actors, both citizens and organizations, establish and validate agreed-upon norms. These normative frameworks must guarantee that analysis, deliberation, and technical proposals strictly adhere to the requirements of rationality and to current institutional and democratic principles (Aguilar, 2024).

A converging trend has been the growing visibility and importance of public innovation as both a demand placed on the State and an object of academic study (Bran-Piedrahita et al., 2023; Desmarchelier et al., 2019). This surge responds to increasing structural pressures that require public services to adopt adaptive and innovative capabilities in the face of uncertain environments (Arros & Ramírez-Alujas, 2017; Borins, 2010; Osborne & Brown, 2011; Ramírez,

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2016). In this context, new forms of collaborative governance constitute one of the mechanisms through which states promote public innovation.

This innovative drive has been triggered by two complementary but distinct lines of thought. First, the hegemony of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm has prompted state bureaucracies to assimilate rationales, principles, and management tools from the private corporate sector (Osborne, 2006; Osborne & Brown, 2011; Pollitt, 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), where innovation is highly valued as a source of value creation. Second, the redesign of the state–society relationship has propelled the adoption of new governance models that demand engagement strategies capable of integrating a more active, participatory, and influential citizenry in public affairs (Bason, 2010; De Vries, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2016; McMullin, 2021).

It should be noted that, while New Public Management (NPM) was instrumental in the initial push toward innovation (Osborne & Brown, 2011), other conceptual frameworks such as the Neo-Weberian State and public governance now provide robust theoretical foundations for fostering innovation capacity from the perspective of public value and democratic legitimacy (Criado et al., 2023; De Vries et al., 2016; Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez, 2021; McMullin, 2021; Pollitt, 2018). From this perspective, public governance, as a political process of public innovation, transcends its purely technical and operational dimensions and emerges as a political and social practice. Its ultimate purpose is to transform traditional governance structures by establishing spaces for experimentation and shared learning that enable the sustained reconfiguration and strengthening of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

4. CASE STUDY: THE PACT FOR A SUSTAINABLE AND INCLUSIVE REGION

The Pact for a Sustainable and Inclusive Region (PSI) program was an initiative of the Regional Government of Los Lagos, launched in 2022 and promoted by the Regional Governor, the highest elected authority in the region. This position is relatively new and emerged from a decentralization process in Chile that culminated in the enactment of Law 20.990, which created this public office. The Regional Governor, in addition to administering the region and presiding over the Regional Council, coordinates and oversees public services and leads the Regional Government in the formulation of regional development policies.

Regional governments in Chile are currently in a transitional phase between the new institutional framework and powers conferred by Law 20.990, along with a new set of competencies still under legislative discussion. In August 2022, the national government announced the preparation of more than forty programs and instruments in productive development, cultural and social development, and territorial planning, which would be transferred to regional decision-making authority. During this interim period, regional governments have begun developing initiatives that explore new forms of governance for regional development. Within this context, the PSI initiative emerged.

The purpose of the Pact was to convene a broad spectrum of economic and social actors, civil society organizations, and higher education institutions to agree on challenges and commitments for the sustainability of the Los Lagos Region. A broad call was issued for the main regional actors to participate in analysis and deliberation sessions aimed at reaching agreements on sustainability and inclusion. In May 2022, the collaborative initiative formally began.

From the outset, the PSI was conceived as an innovative effort in collaborative governance (Mercado et al., 2024; Muñoz & Rivera-Mercado, 2024). Ansell and Gash (2008) propose six criteria for a restrictive definition of collaborative governance: (1) the forum is initiated by public agencies or institutions, (2) the forum participants include non-state actors, (3) participants are directly involved in decision-making and are not merely "consulted" by public agencies, (4) the forum is formally organized and meets collectively, (5) the forum aims to make decisions by consensus (even if consensus is not achieved in practice), and (6) the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management. All of these characteristics are present in the case analyzed (Mercado et al., 2024; Muñoz & Rivera-

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Mercado, 2024). A distinctive feature of the Pact was its voluntary nature, as the regional political authority lacks legal instruments to compel the participation of the invited actors in the process.

The Pact brought together more than 200 organizations, including trade and business associations, public services, higher education institutions, non-governmental organizations, and labor unions, over a period of nearly four years. These organizations were organized into nine working groups, each representing a specific productive sector: agriculture, construction, livestock, forestry, maritime and port activities, mussel farming, salmon farming, tourism, and a public sector working group. Trade associations and businesses comprised 38.4% of the participating organizations, while public services accounted for 34.9%. The remaining organizations included non-governmental organizations, workers' organizations, and academic institutions (Mercado et al., 2024).

Focusing the analysis on the domain of environmental sustainability, consistent with the sectoral program examined in this study, governance refers to the network of institutions, policies, and practices, both formal and informal, that regulate human interaction with the natural environment across different social scales (Hendricks, Betsill, Cheng, & Taylor, 2009). This concept denotes a transition toward regulatory arrangements that transcend traditional state intervention, incorporating mechanisms of corporate self-regulation and robust public–private coordination to address critical environmental challenges (Biermann et al., 2009). Consequently, governance for sustainability is defined as the set of regulatory mechanisms and processes through which sociopolitical actors influence environmental actions and outcomes (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006).

The process consisted of two phases. The first phase identified gaps and challenges and established commitments through a voluntary and deliberative process. Gaps or critical issues refer to lagging areas or deficits where intervention is considered necessary for sustainable and inclusive development. Challenges represent the fundamental objectives that each sector must promote in terms of sustainability and inclusion; they define broad areas of work on priority issues where specific actions must be taken. Commitments consist of concrete actions designed to address the identified challenges. These actions must be necessary, sufficient, and feasible to achieve each challenge within a defined timeframe.

The second phase, once the commitments had been established, focused on supporting the sectoral governance bodies created during the process, building agreements to advance a model of sustainability and inclusion within the framework of cross-cutting initiatives, and monitoring the implementation of the agreements reached. By the end of 2025, 60% of the initiatives prioritized during the first phase of the Pact had shown some level of progress (University of Los Lagos, 2025). The program formally concluded in December 2025.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative case study design based on an in-depth analysis of the Pact for a Sustainable and Inclusive Region, a political innovation process implemented in a region of southern Chile. Following the guidelines of Yin (2018), this approach allows for the examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context. The research is exploratory and relies on document analysis and in-depth interviews with 22 public officials (Table 1). The document analysis included a review of reports and institutional documents related to the Pact, as well as meeting minutes from sectoral governance bodies. The interviews aimed to understand officials' perceptions of their experiences and their assessment of the Pact process. This approach is grounded in the value of interviews for capturing personal experiences within political processes, framed within a situated theoretical perspective (Mueller, 2019).

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Table 1. Profile of interviewees.

Interviewee	Education	Years in Public Service	Organizational Position
1 (F)	Agricultural Engineer	31	Regional Director
2 (M)	Veterinarian	30	Regional Program Director
3 (F)	Aquaculture Engineer	2	Regional Program Director
4 (F)	Lawyer	17	Regional Director
5 (M)	Civil Engineer	5	Professional
6 (M)	Agricultural Engineer	16	Professional
7 (M)	Agricultural Engineer	16	Professional
8 (M)	Agricultural Engineer	15	Regional Director
9 (M)	Business Administration Engineer	20	Regional Program Director
10 (M)	Agricultural Engineer	16	Professional
11 (M)	Public Administrator	10	Professional
12 (M)	Fisheries Engineer	15	National Program Director
13 (F)	Agricultural Engineer	15	Professional
14 (M)	Veterinarian	19	Regional Director
15 (M)	Agricultural Engineer	28	Regional Program Director
16 (F)	Natural Resources Engineer	8	Professional
17 (F)	Commercial Engineer	12	Regional Director
18 (F)	Commercial Engineer	13	Professional
19 (F)	Architect – Commercial Engineer	11	Regional Director
20 (M)	Lawyer	15	Regional Director
21 (F)	Environmental Engineer	8	Regional Director
22 (F)	Agricultural Engineer	5	Professional

Note: (F) female; (M) male.

The selection of interviewees was carried out through purposive sampling, prioritizing public officials who participated directly in the working groups and governance forums of the Pact for a Sustainable and Inclusive Region. The aim was to include participants from different public services and with varying levels of responsibility, ranging from managers to professional staff, in order to capture a diversity of institutional experiences related to the process.

Fieldwork was conducted through online interviews between March and May 2024. All interviewees hold university degrees and have extensive professional experience. The average number of years of experience in the public sector is 15.5, and 17 interviewees have more than ten years of experience in public service. Half of the interviewees are women. This group included 19 participants who had taken part in more than one working group, and almost two-thirds of those interviewed (13) had experience in regional management positions, either as service directors, sectoral program managers, or program heads. This broadened their perspectives compared to those involved in only one productive sector.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide organized around the following analytical dimensions: (a) experience in public service, (b) perception of and relationship with the Pact, (c) perception of the role of public services in the process, (d) facilitators of the process, (e) obstacles to the process, and (f) evaluation of the achievements of the process. After transcription, the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a hybrid approach that combined a deductive dimension informed by the literature on public innovation processes with an inductive dimension that allowed for the emergence of categories from the interview data (Archer, 2018).

Regarding ethical considerations, all participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in the presentation of the results. The research ensured that participation did not pose any risks to participants and that the information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes, following ethical guidelines for social research in community contexts.

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6. RESULTS

6.1. Public Officials' Experiences in the Collaborative Governance Process

Public officials identify collaborative governance as an adaptive response to the limitations of the traditional bureaucratic model in addressing complex territorial challenges. Interviewees emphasize that the program functions as a structure that helps overcome institutional fragmentation. One official notes: "*We understand it as a kind of integrating matrix that fundamentally enables private sector participation and collaboration from public services such as ours in those instances where assuming responsibility or providing support is required*" (E2). This "matrix" is not merely a technical coordination mechanism but also a platform for innovation that breaks with state inertia. Another interviewee described it as follows, emphasizing the exceptional nature of the model within the national context:

> "The Pact is an institution that emerged out of necessity and is highly innovative. As far as I know, there was nothing similar, at least in the country. It brings together key actors from the productive sectors in a single, centralized, and structured forum for dialogue with major public sector actors, which does not usually occur" (E14).

These accounts suggest that collaboration is understood from a pragmatic perspective: the state requires the participation of the private sector to advance environmental sustainability. As E4 states: "*The only way to move toward sustainability [...] is to establish this public–private partnership. Therefore, the private sector has a significant role to play in this area; the state cannot do it alone.*"

Despite the recognition of collaborative governance as a response to complexity, officials also describe a set of tensions stemming from the decoupling between collaborative governance logics and existing bureaucratic routines.

The Pact process reflects a generally positive assessment of collaborative governance, particularly as it promotes forms of institutional decoupling in contexts where public service structures often show resistance or intermittent levels of commitment. While some officials observe a "*real commitment from public services* and the sustained presence of participating actors" (E4), a more critical narrative regarding the quality of participation also emerges. For some interviewees, the program risks becoming a form of ritualized participation.

> "The truth is, I think that this reflects what has often happened in public–private partnerships: these working groups are set up, they last for a while [...], and in the end they always tell you 'This time it's for real,' but everything ends up the same way" (E11).

This lack of institutional consistency is described as "deficient" by other officials, who highlight the difficulty of maintaining engagement when the issues discussed are not directly related to the immediate sectoral agenda, as one interviewee explains.

> "From within the institution where I work, it has been difficult to maintain consistent participation in the working groups over time when there have been no issues that directly concern us [...] it is often the same public services participating repeatedly" (E20).

This finding is particularly relevant, as it suggests that regional governance relies heavily on the voluntary commitment of certain officials rather than on an institutionalized and cross-cutting state policy.

Despite these tensions, officials also highlight positive outcomes associated with the experience, particularly in terms of building trust and strengthening relationships among stakeholders. The main benefit of the Pact experience lies in the generation of social capital and in bridging trust gaps between the public and private sectors. Officials value the governance forums created within the Pact as spaces that help level the playing field, where hierarchical differences are reduced in pursuit of a shared objective.

"[It generated] a situation in which public institutions actively participated in different sectoral roundtables with the private sector. In these spaces, we sat together as equals, with shared objectives, and trust gradually developed, since both institutions and companies are ultimately made up of people" (E14).

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Trust appears here not as a prerequisite but as a product of ongoing dialogue. One interviewee highlights that attitudinal factors such as "*goodwill*" and "*sympathy*" improve interactions among participants (E10). This relational capital helps overcome isolated perspectives and redefines a shared one:

> "We see how each actor tends to pursue their own interests. The public sector focuses on the development of the state; the private sector focuses on the development of companies; and the research sector focuses on its own area of expertise. When all of this comes together, it becomes possible to develop plans or at least move toward a shared vision of what are essentially three sides of the same coin" (E6).

As an analytical synthesis of this section, Figure 1 summarizes the experience of public officials, showing that the collaborative dialogue process is perceived as an ambivalent experience in which at least three interpretive dimensions coexist. The overlap of these dimensions suggests that governance is not a linear process but rather a dynamic one in which optimism regarding collaboration, institutional tensions, and emerging learning processes occur simultaneously, resulting in a complex experience where expectations, challenges, and relational ties converge.

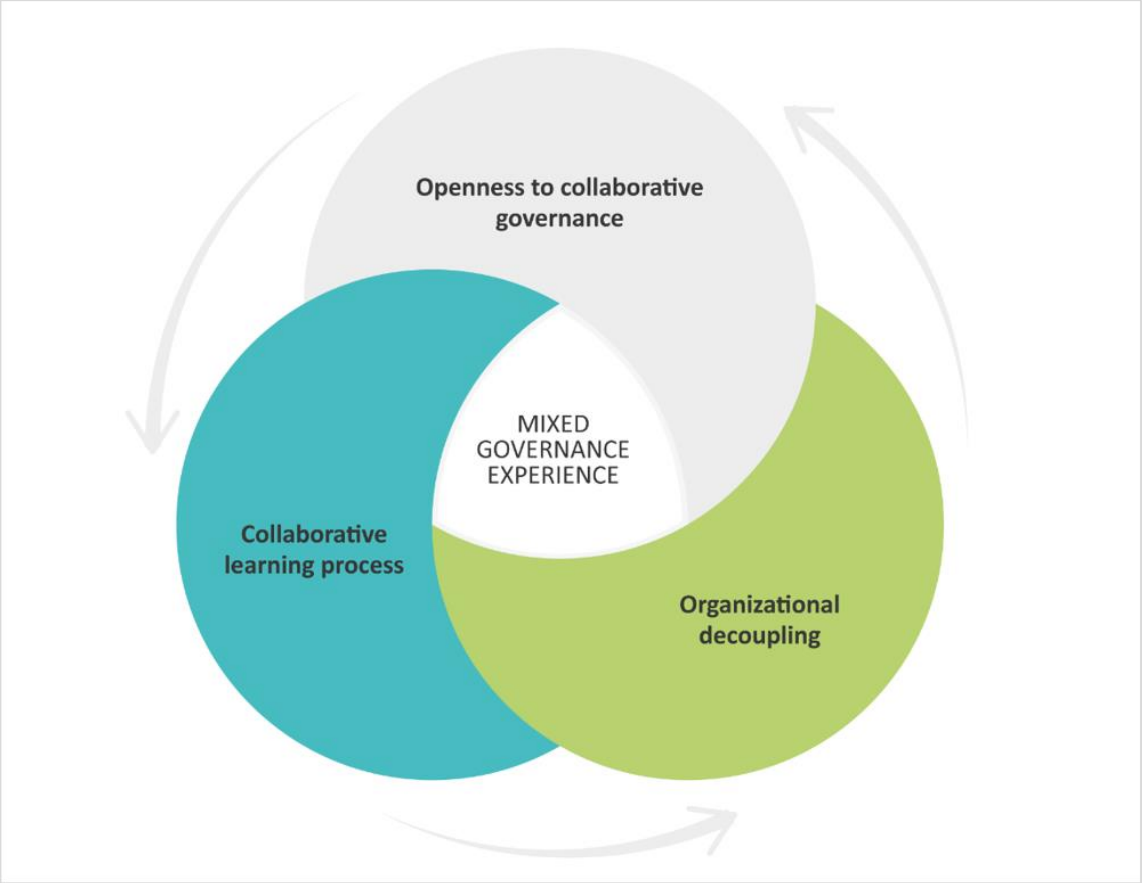


Figure 1. Ambivalent configuration of the collaborative governance experience: the coexistence of openness, institutional decoupling, and learning.

6.2. Constraining Dimensions: Obstacles to the Implementation of Collaborative Governance

One difficulty expressed by public officials during the Pact process, particularly during the implementation phase of the agreements reached on sustainability and inclusion, was the presence of significant resource constraints. Collaborative governance in the public sector reveals a critical gap between the ambition of collaborative design and the precariousness of the resources allocated, placing pressure on officials during implementation. While collaborative processes for addressing public issues are normatively highlighted for their capacity to enable joint action as a pillar of governance arrangements, the findings show that this capacity is weakened by a lack of structural funding and

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human capital. Funding is perceived not only as insufficient but also as a factor that forces the simplification of strategic goals in order to adjust them to budgetary realities. One official warns about the risk of generating expectations without adequate financial support.

> "Resources. I think a lot of resources are needed [...] to develop the ideas. I've seen that efforts have been made to bring things down to earth a bit, to simplify the ideas, narrow the vision somewhat, and look for opportunities in small projects. But of course, I think that if this isn't accompanied by resources and a long-term commitment, we won't get anywhere" (E6).

These financial constraints translate into competition for funds that undermines collaboration. The testimony of E7 illustrates the budgetary rigidity within public services, where basic operations absorb nearly all available resources, leaving collaborative innovation dependent on the availability of competitive grants: *"We spend all the funding the undersecretary gives us [...] on salaries, nothing but salaries. Everything else [...] we have to apply for through competitive grants."*

This financial deficit is compounded by a lack of human capital, creating tension between the demands of governance forums and the regular responsibilities of public officials. This "tyranny of contingency" is described as one of the most persistent barriers:

> "We have a million things to do with everyone, with an ever-shrinking budget. So, that's a difficulty. We're consumed by contingencies, by day-to-day problems, which are our core responsibilities. So, participating in these forums and discussions suddenly doesn't seem so urgent" (E13).

In addition to these operational limitations, the accounts also highlight the vulnerability of the process to political factors associated with leadership and institutional cycles.

Collaborative governance is highly vulnerable to political cycles, as the absence of institutionalized leadership and changes in political authorities generate uncertainty about continuity, discouraging long-term commitment. Officials identify changes in administration as turning points that raise doubts about the continuity of the agreements reached. The political nature of regional management is perceived as a threat to the technical sustainability of the program: *"[Public administration] is subject to political cycles [...] which generate, above all, uncertainty about whether the process will actually continue, given that changes in authority lead to the reevaluation of ongoing actions"* (E10).

In this context, leadership is not seen merely as a managerial function but as a symbolic and financial driving force that, if absent, weakens the collaborative process. Dependence on the figure of the regional authority becomes critical, as one interviewee points out:

> "Since it's an initiative driven by the Regional Government, I feel that the impetus should also come from there [...] If this governor, in particular, doesn't give it a boost or doesn't continue with that momentum, I feel it will fizzle out. I feel that if there isn't an entity that can guide this governance process, some parts may be maintained, but not all" (E20).

This finding reinforces the importance of facilitative leadership but adds a layer of complexity: in the public sector, if leadership is not institutionalized beyond the current authority, collaborative governance risks remaining a "personal" project rather than becoming a structural transformation of the State.

The obstacles identified operate at different levels, showing that the limitations of collaborative governance respond to operational factors, organizational and institutional conditions, and political factors that influence its stability and implementation capacity. This multi-level configuration suggests that consolidating governance requires not only the willingness of actors but also institutional arrangements capable of sustaining these processes over time (Table 2).

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Table 2. Institutional and Operational Obstacles to Collaborative Governance.

Restrictive Dimension	Observed Manifestation	Level
Resource constraints	Lack of funding and human capital limits the implementation of agreements	Organizational / Institutional
Operational overload	Day-to-day contingencies reduce sustained participation	Operational / Day-to-day
Political vulnerability	Changes in political authorities generate uncertainty about the continuity of the process	Political
Leadership dependence	Governance depends on the initiative of specific actors rather than on institutional arrangements	Political

6.3. Catalytic Mechanisms: Facilitators and Lessons for Governance

Collaborative governance acts as a mechanism for mutual institutional literacy, enabling stakeholders to reduce biases and align their expectations regarding management processes. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), shared understanding is a process through which parties not only define the problem but also come to understand each other's operational constraints. For public officials, the working groups helped make the complexity of the state more transparent, helping to overcome the private sector's perception of bureaucratic inefficiency. One official recounts:

> "The chair of the group [...] told me: 'I really never understood how public services worked until now' [...] when they tell you this is going to take a little while, it's not as simple as just showing up and asking like in the private sector" (E6).

This learning process is bidirectional, as it also allows public services to showcase technical capabilities that are often unknown or underestimated by private actors. A researcher who participated in the agricultural roundtable points out that these forums help reveal strategic assets that associations were previously unaware of: "*It turns out they don't know that INIA has world-class specialists and that we have laboratories worth USD 1.5 billion... these kinds of forums allow us to get to know each other*" (E7). In this way, governance contributes to reducing information asymmetries and eroding stereotypes among stakeholders, generating a foundation of mutual technical respect that facilitates subsequent cooperation.

This process of mutual recognition generates effects that transcend the public–private relationship that originally motivated these initiatives. In particular, one of the most relevant outcomes observed is the strengthening of coordination among public agencies themselves. An important finding is that collaborative governance fosters forms of intra-state coordination that the traditional hierarchical structure often fails to achieve. Although the Pact program primarily seeks to promote public–private collaboration, officials highly value the exchange of information among public services. For many interviewees, the roundtables represented their first real point of contact with other ministries.

> "You learn [...] what each service does... I had never had contact with people from the Ministry of Public Works, for example, and you realize that investments are being made related to tourism [...] Things that we normally wouldn't find out about, we learn about through these roundtables" (E12).

This space for cooperation allows participants to address problems that "*are bigger than any single service can handle*" (E5), transforming day-to-day contingencies into opportunities for strategic integration that overcome the usual fragmentation of the state apparatus (E13). In this sense, governance not only articulates interests among sectors but also operates as an informal mechanism for institutional coordination, opening previously nonexistent channels of communication within the state itself.

The sustainability of these governance spaces, however, depends largely on the role of political leadership in promoting and legitimizing them. Regional leadership emerges as the main factor in convening and structuring the process, since political authority provides the legitimacy necessary to ensure the continued participation of actors. In this sense, leadership not only facilitates coordination but also provides a political impetus that encourages

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institutional participation. Officials acknowledge that participation was not entirely voluntary but was supported by an explicit political mandate.

> "Personally, I had the feeling that it was going to be a much more systematic and structured effort because the governor also mandated it, so I thought there was a certain coercion and that no one could really refuse" (E1).

Nevertheless, this dependence on political leadership creates a significant vulnerability to changes in administration. The continuity of the process appears to be closely linked to the priority assigned by the current authority to these initiatives. Consequently, political uncertainty is perceived as a risk to the "energy" of the process (E1), with a decrease in attendance observed when the political directive ceases to be explicit: "*If this is not a priority for the governor, there is a lack of clear guidance on whether we should continue participating or not*" (E3).

Beyond these tensions, governance forums also generate important institutional learning regarding how public policies are designed and implemented. In particular, the case analyzed suggests that collaborative governance enables a shift from a bureaucratic, supply-driven approach to one that is more responsive to local needs. This process represents adaptive learning for public services, which finds in these forums an opportunity to compare their programs with the actual needs perceived by actors in the productive sectors. As one interviewee explains.

> "It is an input for those of us who design public policy because it allows us to verify that the resources, policies, and emphasis of action are indeed directed toward a felt, shared, and real need in the productive sector" (E14).

In this way, direct contact with productive sectors allows institutions to adjust their priorities and better target the use of resources (see Table 3). Instead of operating on administrative assumptions, institutions begin to work on gaps collectively identified within the territory. An official from the infrastructure sector summarizes this clearly: "*Being able to listen to what the needs of the people are... was an important input, because ultimately we need to be connected with that environment in order to know where to direct our infrastructure investments*" (E7).

Table 3. Section Summary.

Catalytic mechanism	Observed dynamics in the roundtables	Learning or effect generated
Mutual learning among actors	Sustained interaction between public and private actors enables a better understanding of the institutional constraints and technical capacities of each sector.	Reduction of stereotypes about the state and greater recognition of public technical capacities.
Intra-state intersectoral coordination	The roundtables create spaces for exchange among public services that normally operate in a fragmented manner.	Improved information flow and the emergence of interinstitutional coordination.
Facilitative political leadership	The regional authority promotes the convening process and legitimizes institutional participation.	Greater initial commitment from participants and structuring of the working process.
Dependence on the political cycle	The continuity of the process depends on the interest of the political authority in office.	Institutional vulnerability and reduced participation when political support declines.
Territorial feedback for policy design	The roundtables allow public programs to be contrasted with the productive demands of the territory.	Adjustment of institutional priorities and greater relevance of public interventions.

7. DISCUSSIONS

The predominantly positive perceptions expressed by public officials confirm (Ansell & Gash, 2008) assertion regarding the importance of resource interdependence. The findings suggest that officials participate not merely in response to hierarchical instructions, but rather out of pragmatic recognition: sustainability and climate change management are wicked problems that the state, operating in isolation, is incapable of solving. In this sense, collaborative governance, understood as a form of public process innovation, enables the addressing of complex issues that exceed the institutional capacity of any single public service or private actor, particularly problems that must be tackled across multiple sectors and by numerous stakeholders, as is the case with sustainability. This opens the

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discussion on the types of issues and problems that may stimulate interest in collaborative governance initiatives. It appears that topics already perceived as novel, exceeding traditional institutional boundaries, or requiring higher levels of coordination constitute opportunities for deploying collaborative strategies.

The description of the program as an integrating matrix (E2) resonates with Emerson et al. (2012) and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) concept of collaborative governance regimes. In this configuration, the Regional Government does not act as a direct executor but rather as a principal, providing the institutional arena and the rules of engagement through which public, private, and academic actors can converge. This validation is significant, as it suggests that public officials may be motivated less by the managerial logic of New Public Management, focused on internal efficiency and market mechanisms, and more by the principles of New Public Governance, where legitimacy is built through networks and co-creation. However, this optimistic vision clashes with the compartmentalized nature of bureaucratic culture. While officials value horizontal forms of collaboration within the Pact forums, their original institutional structures remain vertical and sectoral. This generates a form of identity tension: the official may act as a "collaborative" actor at the Pact table, but returns to a more "bureaucratic" role when operating within their own agency. The discussion of obstacles (Section 4.2) reveals that collaborative governance in Chilean regions still suffers from limited institutional support. The specialized literature emphasizes that, for collaboration to be successful, there must be network management capacity that includes dedicated financial and human resources (O'Leary, Bingham, & Choi, 2010). Our findings partially challenge the idealized view of collaboration as a cost-free "win–win" process. The implementation pressures reported by officials (E13) indicate that collaboration is often perceived as an additional workload rather than as the natural way of working. When an official states that the contingencies of routine administrative work prevent them from attending meetings, they are describing a flaw in institutional design: collaboration has not been integrated into performance indicators or budget allocations within public services. While most actors consider governance important, few have a formal mandate to dedicate time and resources to it. This framework allows the Pact to be conceptualized as a governance process that emerges from the interaction between enabling conditions, catalytic mechanisms, and relational dynamics, which together generate early outcomes in terms of social capital, strategic alignment, and the definition of commitments. However, these advances unfold within a context of structural constraints associated with resource deficits, uncertainty stemming from political cycles, and the weak institutionalization of the process, which limit its capacity to translate into substantive results (Figure 2).

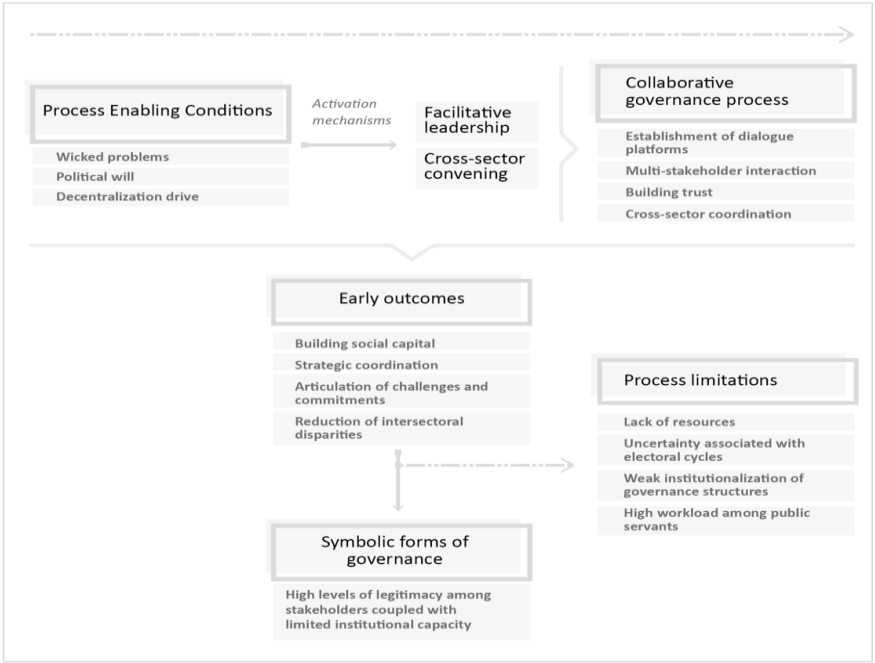


Figure 2. Explanatory model of collaborative governance under enabling conditions and institutional constraints.

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On the other hand, the Pact's vulnerability to political cycles raises critical questions regarding the medium- and long-term sustainability of governance arrangements. The findings indicate that political leadership acts simultaneously as the main facilitator and the main source of risk. If governance depends exclusively on the initiative of the governor in office (E20) or on local authorities such as mayors, the process does not represent a permanent transformation of the state within the national subsystem but rather a temporary administrative initiative. Under these conditions, the experience of collaborative governance remains far from possessing the institutional conditions necessary for replication or for consolidating itself as a stable collaborative platform (Ansell & Gash, 2008) capable of sustaining collaboration over time.

Another relevant finding for the discussion of collaborative governance as a form of public innovation is its role as a space for transformative learning. The reduction of stereotypes mentioned by public officials suggests that face-to-face encounters produce a cognitive shift among both public and private sector participants. The testimony of the official who recounts how a business representative "never understood how public services worked until now" (E6) provides empirical evidence of the power of direct communication to generate knowledge-based trust. This relational learning process corresponds to what Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) describe as principled engagement. It involves not only the exchange of information but also the redefinition of how actors perceive one another. The state ceases to be viewed as a slow bureaucratic machine, while the private sector ceases to be seen solely as a resource-extracting actor. This alignment of expectations becomes an intangible facilitator that reduces transaction costs in regional public policy.

Likewise, unintended intersectoral coordination emerges as a finding that deserves particular attention. It is striking that public services sometimes require meetings with private sector representatives to learn what neighboring public agencies are doing (E12). This suggests that collaborative governance can function as a corrective mechanism for some limitations inherent in sectoral bureaucracies. In this sense, the Pact provided coordination channels that the state itself has not been able to establish internally.

A final element of the discussion concerns whether this experience improves the delivery of public value. The findings indicate a clear alignment with territorial needs. By enabling participants and decision-makers to align their priorities with actors in the productive sectors, governance reduces the risk of designing policies in isolation from local realities.

However, the Pact's real effectiveness may be called into question if financial constraints are not resolved or if the commitments established in the process face limited long-term implementation. The discussion suggests that the experience resembles a low-intensity governance model: characterized by high levels of dialogue and social capital, but limited in implementation capacity and dedicated resources. Scaling toward a higher-intensity governance model would require that the commitments generated in the roundtables be translated into multi-year budgets and greater autonomy for regional public services to determine their investment priorities without excessive dependence on central government directives.

8. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Collaborative governance, as an innovative governance mechanism within political processes, has gained traction as an adaptive response to complex problems such as environmental sustainability, which the state cannot resolve in isolation. The growing visibility and appeal of collaborative governance are further strengthened by its grounding in diverse paradigms of public administration. This transition toward New Public Governance shifts the focus from hierarchical control to network-based governance arrangements, where legitimacy is built through the co-creation of solutions with private and civil society actors.

One of the key findings of this empirical research is that collaborative governance functions as a mechanism for mutual institutional literacy. Recurring dialogue within sectoral roundtables helped erode stereotypes: the private sector came to understand the operational constraints of the bureaucracy, while the public sector was able to highlight

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technical assets and high-level specialists who are often underestimated by industry associations. In this sense, trust emerges as an intrinsic product of the process, reducing information asymmetries and facilitating the development of a shared language for territorial management. The Pact was designed to foster public–private collaboration, and the findings reveal that several of the principles underlying collaborative governance are positively received by public officials. Among these elements, facilitating communication and cultivating trust through interaction with other stakeholders stand out. The governance roundtables acted as the first real point of contact between different public agencies, enabling officials to share strategic information that the traditional hierarchical structure had kept compartmentalized. This breakdown of institutional silos suggests that collaborative governance fosters intersectoral coordination that strengthens the coherence of public intervention within the territory.

The experience also demonstrates that collaboration enables a shift from a bureaucratic, supply-driven approach toward one based on territorial demand. Through direct interaction with productive sectors, public services were able to reassess their priorities and focus resources on locally identified gaps affecting citizens and businesses, rather than operating on isolated institutional assumptions. This adaptive learning is crucial for increasing the relevance and impact of regional public policies.

Despite this generally positive assessment, the sustainability of these innovations faces significant structural obstacles. A critical gap persists between the ambition of collaborative design and the precariousness of the financial and human resources allocated to sustain it. Officials report experiencing implementation pressures because governance-related demands often compete with their core responsibilities and because structural funding is lacking. This "tyranny of contingency," in which the urgency of day-to-day responsibilities consumes the capacity for innovation, risks reducing participation to a merely ritualistic exercise.

Finally, collaborative governance at the subnational level remains highly dependent on the figure of the facilitating political leader. While the support of the regional authority provides the legitimacy and formal authority necessary to convene stakeholders, this dependence creates vulnerability to electoral cycles. If the governance model fails to become institutionalized beyond the current authority's term, it risks being perceived as a personal political initiative rather than a structural transformation of the state, discouraging long-term commitment from involved actors.

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