The Collaborative Agenda

Collaboration is now central to the way in which public policy is made, managed and delivered throughout the world. It is a way of working with others on a joint project where there is a shared interest in positive outcomes. The pre-existing and rigid boundaries between public and private sectors, different tiers of government and voluntary and community agencies are becoming more permeable as actors reach across these organisational divides and explore new ways of developing and delivering public purposes. The most familiar form of collaborative arrangement is the multi-organisational partnership, a formal expression of shared commitment to act in the common interest. Globally, partnership is the new language of public governance – whether through the use of private capital to fund infrastructure projects, the engagement of community organisations in economic development or the integration of state health and social care services.

Partnership is about sharing responsibility and overcoming the inflexibility created by organisational, sectoral and even national boundaries. For example, the 1992 Rio Summit firmly established environmental sustainability as an international priority and highlighted the need for collaborative effort to reduce the rate of global warming. Subsequent action has involved inter-governmental negotiation and transnational activity by non-profit environmental groups together with domestic collaborations under the Local Agenda 21 banner as public, private, voluntary and community sectors have cleaned and greened their local environments (S. Young, 1999).

The notion of working together for the common good that underpins collaborative action is also found in changing approaches to northern hemisphere international development policies, where aid is intended to be allocated in discussion with users rather than as a reflection of the donor’s priorities (James, 2001). A web of interpersonal relationships which arise through networking, however, often supports the formality of a partnership. These constitute a type of social capital (Putnam, 1993). They provide a context within which can be mediated those questions of power, trust and motive that are central to any form of collaboration. Collaborations for public purpose, therefore, are both about the formal structures that emerge and the
This book investigates the place of collaborative action in the achievement of public purpose. Its prime focus is on collaboration that occurs beyond the centre – that takes effect at regional, local and neighbourhood levels. However, in an era of multi-level governance such an assessment necessarily involves an examination of the impact of national and, in the case of EU member states, European institutions. Partnerships have become the preferred delivery mechanisms for many aspects of European and national policy, including those related to economic restructuring, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and the knowledge society. These policy initiatives stimulate activity at sub-national levels and in some cases, as we discuss later, become the means through which very specific policy intentions are expected to be realised. Collaboration, therefore, involves both horizontal and vertical forms of inter-organisational engagement.

**Motivations for collaboration**

The first question this book addresses is why collaboration happens and what the key imperatives are that result in this approach to achieving public purpose. An important explanatory variable is the changing role of the state in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The nature of the state’s transformation has been the subject of much debate by those concerned with the rise of collaboration (such as Montanheiro *et al*., 1999; Rhodes, 1997; Taillieu, 2001) as well as those interested in changing patterns of governance worldwide (including Giddens, 2000; Hirst and Thompson, 1999; Pierre and Peters, 2000). At its heart is a discussion of whether in the prevailing context the state itself has the necessary capacity and resources to deliver public policy goals and, if not, how those gaps can be filled. One response to this capacity problem is to involve other sectors in providing services. In the 1980s the belief that improved services could be provided at lower costs by external providers led to a world-wide fascination with public–private partnerships which began in the UK and throughout the following decade spread to North and South America, Asia and the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries (G. Clarke, 2000; Savas, 2000). For others the motivation was not about effecting improvements but establishing coverage of basic services in the face of state failure. Slater’s (2001) account of the development of voluntaristic partnerships among local private and not-for-profit agencies in South Asia gives evidence of this latter impulse.