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# Life-Cycle Dynamics and Developmental Processes in Collaborative Partnerships:

## Examples from four watersheds in the U.S.

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Collaborative Partnerships:  
Examples from Four Watersheds in the U.S.**

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**Abstract**

Collaborative governance ebbs and flows, partnerships become dormant or extinct, only to resurface with new members, and names, forms, or boundaries. This paper uses a systematic qualitative analysis of data from 4 watershed governance efforts in the United States – Delaware Inland Bays, Narragansett Bay, Tampa Bay, and Tillamook Bay. The study’s objective was to develop theory grounded in these data and examine the developmental trajectories associated with the development of collaborative partnerships.

The paper begins by summarizing a four stage life-cycle model. Each stage represents a cluster of developmental challenges related to sustaining the health and useful life of a governance network. The *activation stage* is the turbulent period of network formation. The *collectivity stage* is exemplified by high member cohesion and reliable network processes. The *institutionalization stage* marks the solidification of network processes. The final stage is *stability, decline, or change* recognizes the various developmental trajectories that collaborative partnerships can follow. The paper focuses primarily on the developmental trajectories associated with the final stage. It identifies a number of reorientations involving minor and rapid changes to the partnership structure that involve less significant developmental challenges. Reorientations involved more significant shifts in core values and purposes with more developmental challenges.

The health and useful life of the collaborative partnerships varied considerably. Some remained relatively healthy and stable for a considerable period of time while others declined quite rapidly. Some partnerships ended when their work was done, while others ended prematurely. Others failed initially but after a recreation endured for a considerable period of time. Termination or recreations often had little linkage to declining health. Healthy partnerships sometimes ended prematurely while unhealthy partnerships endured for a considerable period after its useful life ended. The paper concludes with lessons for theory and practice.

## **Life-Cycles and Developmental Processes in Watershed Partnerships: Sustaining the Useful Life of Governance Networks**

### **Introduction**

Collaborative partnerships are used to address societal problems around the world. This is particularly true in many watersheds, river basins, and coastal areas where problem solving capacity is widely dispersed among actors at different levels of government, none of which can solve problems by acting alone (Bressers et al. 1995, 4). When viewed over longer periods of time, it becomes evident that collaborative governance is dynamic (Ulibarri, et al. 2020). Structures “ebb and flow, become dormant or extinct, and resurface with old and new participants under new names and organizational forms” (Genskow & Born 2006). Unfortunately, research is limited research that informs our understanding of the structure of collaborative governance processes as they develop and change over time (e.g., Ulibarri, et al. 2020; Heikkila & Gerlak 2016, 2005; Gerlak & Heikkila 2006, 2007; Imperial, et al. 2016; Imperial, et al. 2017; Schoon, et al. 2016; Provan, et al. 2009). The dearth of research is easy to explain. Collaborative governance often spans several decades or more, which complicates data collection. Researchers tend to gravitate towards “successful” programs so there is little understanding of situations where collaborations fail or cease to exist. Moreover, much of the research is cross-sectional in nature, which limits our understanding of developmental processes that are a critical part of creating and sustaining a collaborative partnerships.

To address these shortcomings, this paper relies on the qualitative analysis of four longitudinal watershed governance case studies in the United States dating back many decades. Each case consists of a series of watershed partnerships that ebb and flow, change, and at times disappear revealing the myriad of developmental trajectories and change processes that occur. The resulting cross-case analysis examines the following research questions:

- What are the different developmental trajectories that occur in collaborative partnerships?
- To what extent are collaborative partnerships and their reorientations or recreations self-initiated or externally driven?
- Is there a linkage between reorientations (or recreations) and the need to improve the healthy and useful life of collaborative partnerships.

Understanding developmental dynamics is critical to theory building. It is also essential to provide managers with sound advice to build and maintain healthy and useful collaborative partnerships. The focus on a partnership’s healthy and useful life is to draw attention to the functional and purposeful nature of collaboration. While collaborative partnerships may be self-organizing, they are not self-executing. Sustaining a collaborative partnerships requires nurturing to maintain its healthy and useful life (Imperial, et al. 2016). *Nurturing* implies the gentle continuous care of things like fragile plants or small children. However, nurturing an overgrown garden back to health may require drastic tactics like chopping down excess growth, pulling out dead plants, bringing in new topsoil, and adding fertilizer to make the soil healthy (Imperial, et al. 2016). The same is true for collaborative partnerships (Huxham 2003, 417).

Nurturing is often gentle and continuous, however, there are times where fundamental transformations are needed to sustain the partnership's useful life (Imperial, et al. 2016). Sometimes these choices are decided internally while other times changes are forced upon a collaborative partnership from external forces.

### **Framework Describing the Developmental Processes for Collaborative Partnerships**

Different models for the developmental process for collaborative partnerships exist (e.g., Sydow 2004; Sydow et al. 2009; Sandstrom et al. 2015; Harbron 2003; Dwyer, et al. 1987; Ring and Van de Ven 1994; Popp, et al. 2014; Waddock 1989). While there is little agreement on terminology, researchers generally agree that network processes go through several developmental stages with initial stages focused on building relationships and later stages focus on stability and getting things done (Popp, et al. 2014; Mandell & Keast 2008; Forsyth 1999). This study builds upon a Life-Cycle model proposed by Imperial and others (Imperial, et al. 2016; Ulibarri, et al. 2020). Their four-stage model is based loosely on ecological theories of organization and draws attention to the developmental challenges during each stage (Cameron & Whetten 1981, 1983; Quinn & Cameron 1983; Whetten 1987; Miller & Friesen 1983, 1984; Smith et al., 1985; Hanks et al., 1993) [Table 1].

The *activation stage* reflects the turbulent period involving the formation of the collaborative partnership (Imperial et al. 2016). When first activated, members are a fragmented and unstable social system (Mandell & Keast 2008). Processes are fluid. Members come and go, and different strategies and purposes are considered. The cost and risk of change is low because members have limited investment in the development of the rules, routines, and processes (Katz and Gartner 1988). While the social architecture or "structure" of the partnership remains somewhat ill-defined, shared norms and values start to emerge that distinguish the "partnership" from its members (Imperial et al. 2016).

The somewhat turbulent activation period eventually gives way to an increasingly stable *collectivity stage* exemplified by shared agreement on membership and high member cohesion (Imperial et al. 2016). Processes are shaped largely by personal relationships at the beginning of the stage as decisions about the rules and norms are negotiated and emerge as a by-product of interactions and decision making processes. However, by the end of the stage, there is growing resistance to change as the social architecture is solidified and interest shifts towards achieving the purposes that motivate participation in the partnership (Imperial et al. 2016; Head 2008).

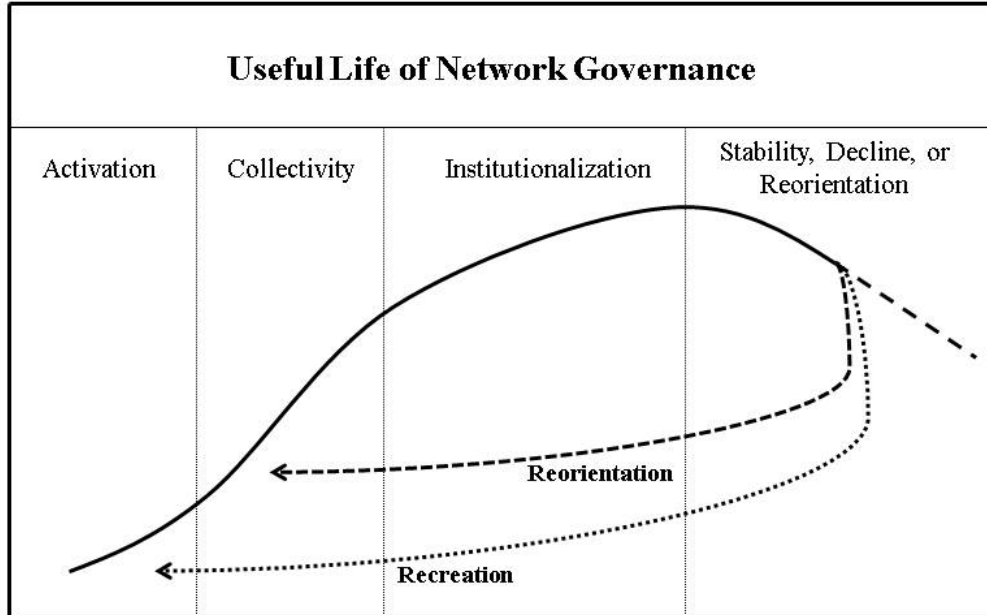
The *institutionalization stage* marks the solidification or convergence on a configuration of rules that provide the structure that shapes and constrains collaborative processes (Imperial et al. 2016). At this point, processes and the resources needed to sustain them are stable. The focus shifts to producing goods and services efficiently. Participants may not need to meet as frequently as they have worked together for some time and the social structure now coordinates joint action. Partnerships begin to codify and institutionalize key aspects of the partnership's structure (e.g., rules, routines, and procedures) using formal mechanisms (e.g., by-laws, work

**Table 1: Key Differences in the Stages of Partnership Development**

	<b>Stages of Network Development</b>			<b>Stability, Decline, or Change</b>
	<i>Activation</i>	<i>Collectivity</i>	<i>Institutionalization</i>	
<b>Useful Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the partnership exist?</li> <li>▪ Is there some public value to creating the partnership?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the partnership produce a good or service using a reliable process?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Does the perceived value of the goods and services exceed the costs?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Could the resources contributed to partnership be deployed better?</li> </ul>
<b>Emphasis</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Determine if the partnership should exist</li> <li>▪ Build relationships</li> <li>▪ Establish core values and mission</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Forge a cohesive whole from diverse members</li> <li>▪ Create stable network processes for partnership to function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Institutionalize the social architecture</li> <li>▪ Improve efficiency of the partnership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Incremental change to improve performance</li> <li>▪ External threats and performance issues lead to Reorientation</li> </ul>
<b>Membership and Social System</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unstable at first</li> <li>▪ Stable processes and stable membership soon emerge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Membership stabilizes</li> <li>▪ Cohesive processes create stable system</li> <li>▪ Heavily dependent on personal relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Very stable</li> <li>▪ While relationships remain important, the process is no longer dependent on individuals</li> <li>▪ New members quickly socialized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ May be stable</li> <li>▪ Excessive member turnover, declining commitments, performance issues create instability.</li> <li>▪ Reorientations create instability</li> </ul>
<b>Commitment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Membership is viewed to advance individual or organizational goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High personal commitment to the partnership and its shared goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Individually based commitments become organizational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Commitments correlate with collective performance</li> <li>▪ Members look to redeploy resources to new problems</li> </ul>
<b>Resistance to change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Very low</li> <li>▪ Frequent changes as members search for appropriate processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Growing resistance to change as the need to produce goods and services takes hold</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High resistance to change</li> <li>▪ Mostly incremental change to reduce costs and improve performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High resistance to change</li> <li>▪ Resistance remains high in the face of threats and poor performance</li> </ul>
<b>Network Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Heavily reliant on collaborative leaders to initiate processes that allow the partnership to function</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Collaborative leaders coordinate and facilitate processes</li> <li>▪ Leadership is increasingly shared by members of the partnership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Leadership is distributed and shared by members</li> <li>▪ As founders retire or leave, new leaders cultivated and activated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Leadership is distributed and shared due to structure and processes</li> <li>▪ Collaborative leaders are needed to guide Reorientations</li> </ul>

**Modified from:** Imperial, et al. 2016

**Figure 1: Life Cycle Model of Collaborative Partnerships**



Source: Imperial, et al. 2016

plans, plans, membership directories, websites, and other program documents) to reinforce the network's identity, lessen reliance on personal relationships, and socialize new participants to the collaborative processes (Imperial et al. 2016). Accordingly, the emphasis is creating a partnership structure that is efficient and 'built to last' (Head 2008).

The final stage is *stability, decline, or change*. This stage recognizes the various paths that occur in mature collaborative partnerships (Imperial et al. 2016). Some partnerships remain relatively useful and productive for a considerable period of time with only slight declines in health if they can sustain the resources needed for survival. Others decline rapidly because participants cannot sustain the resources or commitments to achieve its purposes or the partnership's structure is flawed in some way. Members also make changes to the partnership's structure. *Reorientations* involve rapid and discontinuous change, which alters the character and fabric of the partnership's structure and processes, which returns participants to confront the challenges in the collectivity and institutionalization stages. *Recreations* involve additional and much larger shifts in core members, purposes, and values, which returns members to the activation stage. These changes are more complicated and take longer to achieve.

While reorientations and recreations occur at any time for many reasons, they are depicted in the final stage of Figure 1 to emphasize the convergence process and emphasize the notion of punctuated equilibrium (Imperial et al. 2016; Tushman and Romanelli 1985). What is converged upon is the configuration of shared rules and norms that create the social architecture or "structure" of the collaborative partnership. Long periods of convergence are punctuated by relatively rapid reorientations or recreations (Imperial et al. 2016; Tushman and Romanelli

1985). While the last stage of life is decline and death, there is no reason to presuppose that all partnerships die. Similarly, others die untimely deaths or survive well past their useful lives. Much like life, death can occur at any time for a myriad of reasons (Imperial et al 2016, 136).

The important features of each stage are summarized in Table 1 and are described in more detail elsewhere (Imperial et al. 2016). While the stages suggest a sequential or linear developmental process, that need not be the case (Ulibarri, et al. 2020). The developmental processes associated with collaborative partnerships are iterative and it takes time to develop communication, trust, commitment, understanding, and outcomes (Johnston et al. 2010; Ansell & Gash 2007; Jap and Anderson 2007; Mandell and Keast 2008). Moreover, partnerships can confront challenges from different developmental stages simultaneously (Imperial et al. 2016, 136; Whetten 1987; Tushman & Romanelli 1985).

## **Data & Methods**

Given the lack of precisely defined theories about the life-cycles of collaborative partnerships, the study is largely developmental and focuses on generating theory about their dynamics that are grounded in the data and the literature (Yin 1994; Agranoff & Radin 1991; Strauss & Corbin 1990; Glaser & Strauss 1967). The study relies on four longitudinal case studies examining watershed governance in: Inland Bays (DE); Narragansett Bay (RI, MA); Tampa Bay (FL); and Tillamook Bay (OR). Table 2 summarizes some of the key characteristics of each watershed. All four watersheds participate in the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) National Estuary Program (NEP) but also had collaborative watershed partnerships predating their participation. They vary in geographic size, population, and institutional complexity. They include urban and rural settings, and their partners address a wide range of environmental problems.

The development of the longitudinal cases originated with a study for the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) that included field interviews with more than 160 individuals, archival records, and the direct observation of events and meetings during site visits to develop their detailed case histories (Imperial & Hennessey 2000). In subsequent years, periodic interviews with key informants and supplemental collection of archival materials allowed researchers to continue monitoring the life-cycle of these governance efforts as they ebb and flow over time and their subsequent reorientations and recreations.

Systematic qualitative techniques such as coding were used to examine these data. Codes were derived inductively and deductively from these data and generated based on a start list derived from previous research. Cross-case analysis was used to deepen the understanding of collaborative processes and determine the extent to which findings extended beyond individual cases. The basic approach was one of synthesizing interpretations and looking for themes that cut across cases (Miles & Huberman 1994). Examining different data sources also allowed triangulation to be used to improve the validity of the study's findings (Yin 1994). These methods and case histories are documented in more detail elsewhere (Imperial, et al. 2017; Imperial 2005a, 2005b; Imperial & Hennessey 2000).

**Table 2: Comparison of the Four Case Study Watersheds**

	<b>Inland Bays</b>	<b>Narragansett Bay</b>	<b>Tampa Bay</b>	<b>Tillamook Bay</b>
<b>Physical Environment</b>				
Water body	Inland Bays (DE)	Narragansett Bay (RI, MA)	Tampa Bay (FL)	Tillamook Bay (OR)
Size of watershed	300 square miles	1,705 square miles	2,200 square miles	597 square miles
Population (2017)	225,000 <sup>a</sup>	1,950,000	2,700,000	26,500 <sup>a</sup>
Focal problem(s)	Nutrient loading	None	Nutrient loading & seagrass loss	Shellfish closures, sedimentation, & endangered species
Sources/causes of problem(s)	Chicken farms, Septic systems, point sources, & stormwater	Diverse sources & causes	nutrient loading from diverse sources & habitat loss	bacterial loading & sedimentation from agricult., forestry, & urban sources
<b>Institutional Environment</b>				
Jurisdictional complexity	Low	High	Medium – High	Low – Medium
Level of conflict	Medium	High.	Low	Low
Current Collaborative Effort	Center for the Inland Bays (CIB)	Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP)	Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP)	Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP)
Organizational Arrangement	Nonprofit Organization	Independent program in govt. organization	Alliance of local governments	Nonprofit Organization
Institutionalization	Legislation forming nonprofit/by-laws/CCMP/other documents & website	CCMP/other documents & website	Interlocal Agreement/by-laws/CCMP/other documents & website	501 (c)3 incorporation/by-laws/CCMP/other documents & website
Primary Funding Sources	Federal, state	Federal	Federal, state, regional, & local	Federal
Funding amount/stability	Low/Medium	Low/Low	High/High	Medium/Medium
Shared goals or targets	Limited	Limited	Many	Limited
Scope of collaborative activity	Medium	Low	High	Low-Medium
Monitoring/Reporting	Medium	Low	High	Medium

**Note:** Assessments of high, medium and low are based on comparisons among the four programs.

<sup>a</sup> Measured at the county level



The cross-case analysis reported here focuses primarily on two areas. The first identified the collaborative watershed partnerships, the subsequent reorientations or recreations, and judgements about the overall health and usefulness based on available data. Excluded from consideration were the frequent operational level collaborations (e.g., individual collaborative projects) that occurred in the watersheds (Imperial 2005a; Imperial & Kauneckis 2003). Similarly, the analysis did not focus on the sub-basin level collaborations (e.g., smaller scale watershed efforts) nested within the watershed that occurred with some frequency in the Narragansett Bay given its larger scale (Imperial, et al. 2017). However, the analysis does include regional collaborations when the watershed was itself nested within a larger geographic area. The second part of the analysis examines whether partnership development or the changes that occurred (i.e., reorientations or recreations) were self-initiated or externally driven and the extent to which they were linked to changes in their health or usefulness. Table 3 lists each partnership, its developmental trajectory, and summary judgement about its health and usefulness

### **Developmental Trajectories**

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the trajectories summarized in Table 3. The results demonstrate many possible developmental trajectories that occur when collaborative partnerships are viewed over time. The only trajectory without a clear example is failed activation. Ulibarri and her colleagues (2020) produced a similar pattern of developmental paths when they examined 21 different collaborative partnerships from a much wider range of policy settings and geographic locations. Clearly, the pattern of reorientations and recreations is far messier than Figure 1.

### ***Stability: Getting the Structure Right***

Sometimes participants get the structure right and produce a stable partnership that endures for a considerable period of time because it generates the resources needed for survival. For example, the Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) and Center for the Inland Bays (CIB) managed the initial transition from planning to implementation quite well and experienced a relatively long period of stability, which was punctuated by minor *reorientations*. In Tillamook, it took a second attempt with the recreation from the TCCP to the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) to form a more durable partnership structure.

### ***Reorientations***

The distinction between reorientations and recreations differentiates two different types of change in the structure of a collaborative partnership. *Reorientations* involve relatively rapid and discontinuous changes in rules that alter the character of the network's structure and processes in some tangible, albeit a relatively minor way. The reorientation modifies collaborative processes by altering communication patterns, decision processes, or established routines such that new processes emerge. In Figure 1 and 4, they are represented by a dashed line returning to the collectivity stage. Observed changes were relatively minor such as introducing new members (e.g., CIB and TBEP) or refining goals that change how members work together or their group dynamics. Reorientations also occur in response to dissatisfaction

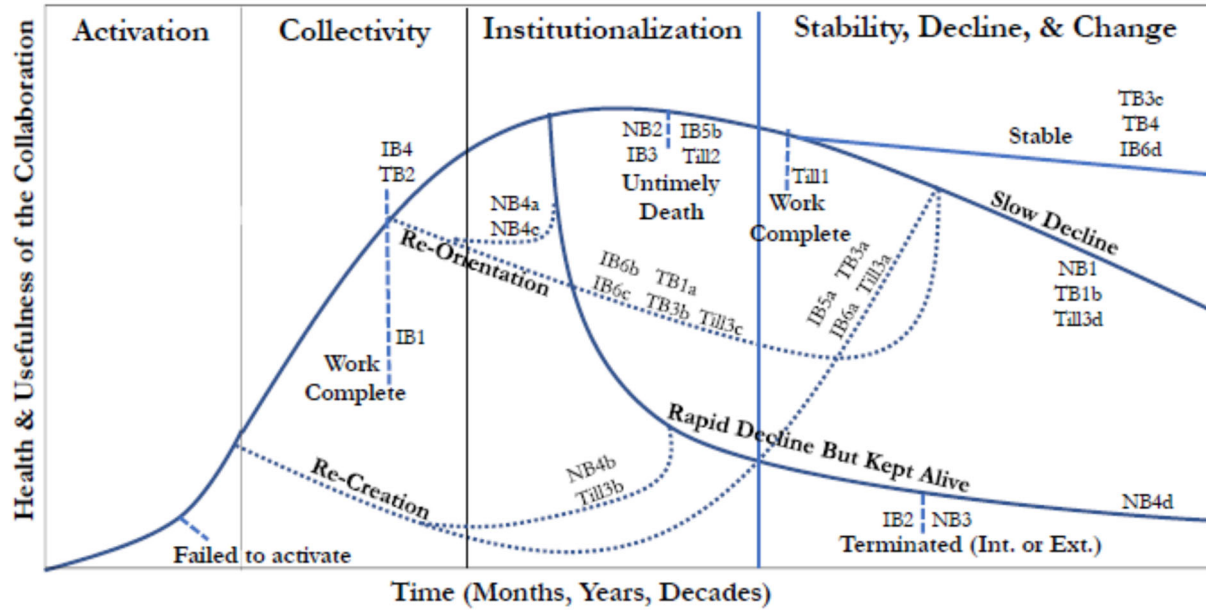
**Table 3: Collaborative Governance Efforts in the Four Watersheds**

<b>Collaborative Governance Effort</b>	<b>Begin</b>	<b>End</b>	<b>Initialization</b>	<b>End Stage</b>	<b>Health &amp; Usefulness</b>
<b>Inland Bays (DE)</b>					
<i>Environmental Study of Rehoboth, Indian River and Assawoman Bay (IB1)</i>	1969	1969	Self-Initiated	Work Complete	Low
<i>Coastal Sussex Water Quality Program (CWA Section 208) (IB2)</i>	1972	1981	External: Mandate	Death	Low
Inland Bays Study Group (IBSG) (IB3)	1981	1983	Self-Initiated	Untimely Death	High
<i>Decisions for Delaware: Sea Grant Looks at the Inland Bays (IB4)</i>	1982	1983	Self-Initiated	Work Complete	Med.
Governor’s Task Force on the Inland Bays (GTFIB) (IB5a)	1983	1984	External: Mandate	Recreation: IBMC	High
Inland Bays Monitoring Committee (IBMC) (IB5b)	1984	1988	External: Mandate	Untimely Death	High
Delaware Inland Bays Estuary Program (DIBEP) (IB6a)	1988	1995	External: Incentive	Recreation	Low – Med. (Perspective)
Center for the Inland Bays (CIB) (IB6b)	1994	1995	Self-initiated: Constraints	Reorientation	Low – Med. (Perspective)
Center for the Inland Bays (CIB) (IB6c)	1995	2015	Self-initiated: Constraints	Reorientation	Med. - High (Perspective)
Center for the Inland Bays (CIB) (IB6d)	2015	Ongoing	Self-initiated: Constraints	Stable	Med. - High (Perspective)
<b>Narragansett Bay (RI, MA)</b>					
New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NB1)	1948	Ongoing	External: Mandate	Slow Decline	Med.
New England River Basins Commission (NB2)	1967	1981	External: Mandate	Untimely Death	High
RI Areawide Water Quality Management Plan Section 208 Comprehensive Plan (NB3)	1972	1981	External: Mandate	Death	Low
Narragansett Bay Project (NBP) (NB4a)	1985	1993	External: Incentive	Reorientation	Low
Narragansett Bay Project (NBP) (NB4b)	1993	1995	Self-initiated: Constraints	Recreation: NBEP	Low
Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) (NB4c)	1995	2012	Self-initiated: Constraints	Reorientation	Low
Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) (NB4d)	2012	Ongoing	External: Incentive	Stable	Low

**Table 3: Collaborative Governance Efforts in the Four Watersheds (Cont.)**

<b>Collaborative Governance Effort</b>	<b>Begin</b>	<b>End</b>	<b>Initialization</b>	<b>End Stage</b>	<b>Health &amp; Usefulness</b>
<b>Tampa Bay (FL)</b> Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council (TBRPC) <b>(TB1a)</b>	1962	Ongoing	Self-initiated	Reorientation: ABM	Med.
Tampa Bay Study Commission <b>(TB2)</b>	1983	1984	External: Mandate	Work Complete	Med. – High
TRBPC’s Agency on Bay Management (ABM) <b>(TB1b)</b>	1985	Ongoing	Self-initiated: Constraints	Slow Decline	Med. – High
Tampa Bay National Estuary Program (TBNEP) <b>(TB3a)</b>	1990	1998	External: Incentive	Re-Creation: TBEP, NMC	High
Tampa Bay Nitrogen Management Consortium (NMC) <b>(TB4)</b>	1996	Ongoing	Self-initiated: Constraints	Stable	High
Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) <b>(TB3b)</b>	1998	2015	Self-initiated: Constraints	Reorientation	High
Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) <b>(TB3c)</b>	2015	Ongoing	Self-initiated: Constraints	Stable	High
<b>Tillamook Bay Watershed</b>					
USDA Rural Clear Water Project <b>(Till1)</b>	1981	1996	External- Incentive	Work Complete	Healthy & Useful
Bay Sanitation Technical Advisory Committee (BSTAC) <b>(Till2)</b>	1987	1993	External: Mandate	Untimely Death	Healthy & Useful
Tillamook Bay National Estuary Program (TBNEP) <b>(Till3a)</b>	1993	1999	External: Incentive	Recreation: TCCP	Low – Med. (Perspective)
Tillamook County Performance Partnership (TCPP) <b>(Till3b)</b>	1999	2002	Self-initiated: Constraints	Recreation: TEP	Low
Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) <b>(Till3c)</b>	2002	2004	Self-initiated: Constraints	Reorientation	Low – Med. (Perspective)
Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) <b>(Till3d)</b>	2004	Ongoing	Self-initiated: Constraints	Slow Decline	Low – Med. (Perspective)

**Figure 4: Developmental Trajectories for Each Collaborative Partnership**



with the perceived return on investment in network processes, the emergence of new priorities, a shift in purposes, the loss of valued network members (or their resources), or excessive turnover that causes network members to question prevailing norms, values, or the network’s way of doing things. They also occur in response to mergers (or de-mergers), new start-ups, the disbanding of organizations in the network, or changes in capacity that allow organizations to join the collaboration (Huxham 2003, 412). External mandates or incentives can also trigger reorientations.

There were many examples of reorientations, most of which involved fine-tuning the partnership structure with the hope of improving its health or usefulness or to respond to external pressures. For example, the year after the CIB was created, it asked the legislature to make the chair of the Citizen’s Action Committee (CAC) a voting member. More recently, it changed its membership again to include up to 4 citizen members appointed by the Board, which changes its internal dynamics. After years of decline, the NBEP’s management committee adopted a corrective action plan that included hiring a new director and staff and moving its home to the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NEIWPCC) attempting to improve the health and usefulness of its collaborative processes and better implement its newly adopted Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). In Tampa Bay, the reorientation of the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Commission (TBRPC) led to the establishment of the Agency on Bay Management (ABM) that altered how it addressed and commented on issues impacting Tampa Bay. Similarly, the TBEP went through two recent reorientations when it adopted an updated interlocal agreement and modified their shared goals and commitments based on its updated CCMP. It underwent a further reorientation the following year when Pasco County and the Manatee County Port Authority joined the

partnership. The Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) underwent a reorientation in 2004 when the county passed a resolution changing its status from a voting to an ex-officio member. Based on these data, reorientations most frequently involved updating goals and purposes or introducing new members aligned with the partnership's existing values and purposes.

### ***Recreations***

Other changes were much more significant. *Recreations* alter the core values or purposes of the collaborative partnership (Imperial, et. al. 2016). This includes adding new members, changing the mission, rebranding (e.g., new partnership name), or modifying the geographic scope, or perhaps using the strategy of *deactivation* to expel members (Mandell and Steelman 2003, 215). The dashed line in Figure 1 and 4 indicates a return to the activation stage because the changes are more significant and take longer to achieve because members must again negotiate and reach agreement on changes to the partnership's structure. However, many of the core values and purposes remain that motivated member participation in the prior partnership structure. Recreations do not include spin offs where the work of one collaborative partnership leads to the creation of another distinct partnership. The creation of the Tampa Bay Nitrogen Management Consortium (TBNMC) was a great example of where a narrowly focused partnership emerged to assist the TBEP meet the goals contained in the interlocal agreement.

Recreations occur for two reasons based on these data. There was some shift in purpose, best exemplified by the fact that the partnership designed to develop a plan was often not well suited to for the purpose of implementing a plan. For example, when the Governor's Task Force on the Inland Bays (GTFIB) completed its report on the Inland Bays, the governor signed a new executive order creating the Inland Bays Monitoring Committee (IBMC). While it had many of the same members, it was charged with a new purpose and given a new name that emphasized the change in mission. The CIB and TBEP also adopted new names that signified fundamental shifts in mission. The CIB shifted more to research, information sharing, and demonstration projects exemplified by the use of the term "Center" in their new name. Interestingly, Tampa Bay dropped "National" from the name to emphasize that it was first and foremost a local government partnership.

The other primary reason for a recreation was when the partnership experienced a rapid decline in health and usefulness as indicated in Figure 4. In other words, initial design choices failed, often quickly. This was the case with the Tillamook County Performance Partnership (TCPP) that only lasted about 3 years. It was recreated as the Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) and chartered as a nonprofit organization. It expanded its geographic footprint to include all the estuary watershed areas within the jurisdiction of Tillamook County. Accordingly, while the core purposes remain largely unchanged, the membership underwent a major transition. County government was no longer providing a leadership role as it had in many of the prior collaborative governance efforts. The same was true for the Narragansett Bay Project (NBP). Its reorganization as a program within the state's department of environmental management and creation of a much smaller implementation committee. This arrangement suffered a rapid decline in usefulness and 2 years later was rebranded as the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) with a management and advisory committee. However, the committees lacked clear

purposes and consequently met infrequently. The new collaborative partnership declined rapidly in health and usefulness and even experienced periods of slumber without much joint activity.

### ***Death Does Occur, But Maybe Not When it Should***

Death also occurred for a myriad of reasons [Figure 4]. There were examples of untimely death. The Inland Bays Study Group (IBSG) was effectively replaced by the GTFIB. The IBMC was replaced by the Delaware Inland Bays Estuary Program (DIBEP). Those efforts were largely perceived to be healthy collaborative partnerships at the time they were eliminated. The New England River Basin Commission (NERBC) suffered an untimely death when President Reagan's executive order eliminated the federal program. At the time, the NERBC was widely regarded as the most successful of the river basin commissions (Imperial, et al. 2017). Other partnerships experienced a relatively rapid death like the Section 208 planning processes in the Inland Bays and Narragansett Bay. While the collaborative processes had value, particularly in Rhode Island, implementation funding was lacking and effectively terminated by EPA in 1981. While both processes could have continued, the withdrawal of federal support led to a quick decision by local participants to end the efforts.

There were examples of partnerships that ended for the right reasons once their work was completed. This freed up collaborative space and allowed new partnerships to emerge. For example, Tampa Bay Study Commission (TBSC) and Sea Grant's report on the Inland Bays completed their work before ever getting to the institutionalization stage. These efforts were met with mixed success but served important functions. For example, while many of TBSC's recommendations were not implemented, it did elevate attention to the problems in Tampa Bay and is largely attributed as leading to the TBRPC's creation of the ABM. Conversely, the impact of the *Environmental Study* completed for the Inland Bays in 1969 was limited primarily to drawing attention to some of the water quality problems in the watershed. Some took much longer to complete their work like the Rural Clean Water Program (RCWP) in Tillamook Bay, which lasted from 1981 until 1996 when the project ran its course and funding was eliminated. However, it was extremely effective in terms of installing BMPs on dairy farms throughout the watershed. Tillamook County's Bay Sanitation Technical Advisory Committee was eliminated with the establishment of the Tillamook Bay National Estuary Program (TBNEP). It provided a useful coordination mechanism and many of its members became the core of the TBNEP's new management committee.

Unfortunately, there were examples of collaborative partnerships with a long history of failure that somehow refuse to die. Despite a recreation and two reorientations the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) experienced more than two decades of decline in health and usefulness even though other collaborative partnerships within the watershed flourished (Imperial, et al. 2017). In each instance, the NBEP's decline was triggered by poor design choices with the partnership's structure and the lack of agreement concerning how power and decision making should be shared (Imperial, et al. 2017). Even the EPA concluded in several internal evaluations that the NBEP's performance was unsatisfactory. Despite its poor health and limited success, the EPA and some members were reluctant to reorient, recreate, or disband the network. If EPA ever ceases funding the NBEP, it is likely it will die a quick death.

## **Internal vs. External Activation & Change**

The results provide examples where the “death” of a collaborative partnership was either self-initiated or externally driven. While we know that collaborative partnerships can be self-initiated or externally driven, it is unclear how these drivers are linked to developmental processes or the subsequent changes in collaborative partnerships. This is to be expected because the literature provides a variety of reasons that collaborative governance partnerships are established (Imperial, et al. 2018). Government agencies, funders, or other ‘top-down’ forces encourage or require member participation or specify other aspects of the structure and processes. Partnerships also self-organize to address a common problem, provide a service, or accomplish a task (Huxham and Vangen 2000; Huxham 2003). Some are designed deliberately and reflect the *intentionality* resulting from the shared goals of founding members (Katz and Gartner 1988). Others are emergent and take shape as participants grapple with different challenges (Head 2008).

Ulibarri and her colleagues (2020) analyzed 21 collaborative partnerships from a variety of policy settings. About half the partnerships were externally driven and the other half were self-initiated. Their exploratory cross case analysis suggests several interesting findings. Self-initiated collaborative governance processes tended to maintain more robust deliberative, shared decision making process when compared to externally driven partnerships (Ulibarri, et al. 2020, 625). Self-initiated partnerships had higher ratings for leadership while externally driven partnerships experienced greater decline in leadership over time (Ulibarri, et al. 2020, 627). Internally-driven partnerships were also higher than externally driven partnerships in perceived accountability (Ulibarri, et al. 2020, 628).

These data produced a similar pattern of self-initiated and externally driven collaborative partnerships. As noted in Table 4, roughly an even number of self-initiated (16) and externally initiated changes (14) were observed. While 4 self-initiated changes were observed that had no constraints on rule development, it was more common to observe self-initiated changes that were subject to constraints (12). These constraints emerge from two sources. Many reorientations or recreations were subject to rules institutionalized in some higher order set of rules (e.g., binding agreement, legislation, etc.). Collaborations also receive grant funds that impose obligations in terms of duties or tasks but in no way constrained the partnership’s structure. Other initiations and changes were driven externally by some sort of mandate (e.g., legislation, executive order) (8) or resulted from incentives designed to induce voluntary partnership development (e.g., federal grant) (6). No clear pattern emerged in terms of whether the findings support those of Ulibarri and her colleagues (2020) that self-initiated processes had greater deliberative, shared decision making process, higher leadership, or provided more accountability. However, many of the more stable, enduring, and healthy partnerships were self-initiated. Conversely, many of the partnerships with limited duration, premature deaths, or were generally unhealthy were constrained by factors that were often externally driven. These are important questions for future research.

**Table 4: Typology of Change Initiation Process**

Self-Initiated	Externally Initiated
<p><b>No Constraints on Rule Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Environmental Study of Rehoboth, Indian River and Assawoman Bay (IB1)</i></li> <li>▪ Inland Bays Study Group (IBSG) (IB3)</li> <li>▪ <i>Decisions for Delaware: Sea Grant Looks at the Inland Bays (IB4)</i></li> <li>▪ Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council (TBRPC) (TB1a)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mandate:</b> Legislation, Executive Order, or other directive compels specifies one or more rules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Coastal Sussex Water Quality Program (CWA Section 208) (IB2)</i></li> <li>▪ Governor’s Task Force on the Inland Bays (GTFIB) (IB5a)</li> <li>▪ Inland Bays Monitoring Committee (IBMC) (IB5b)</li> <li>▪ New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission (NB1)</li> <li>▪ New England River Basins Commission (NB2)</li> <li>▪ RI Areawide Water Quality Management Plan Section 208 Comprehensive Plan (NB3)</li> <li>▪ Tampa Bay Study Commission (TB2)</li> <li>▪ Bay Sanitation Technical Advisory Committee (BSTAC) (Till2)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Constraints:</b> Grant conditions or due to institutionalization process creates higher order rules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Center for the Inland Bays (CIB) (IB6b, c, d)</li> <li>▪ Narragansett Bay Project (NBP) (NB4b)</li> <li>▪ Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) (NB4c)</li> <li>▪ TRBPC’s Agency on Bay Management (ABM) (TB1b)</li> <li>▪ Tampa Bay Nitrogen Management Consortium (NMC) (TB4)</li> <li>▪ Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP) (TB3b, c)</li> <li>▪ Tillamook County Performance Partnership (TCPP) (Till3b)</li> <li>▪ Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) (Till3c, d)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Incentives:</b> voluntary participation but grant conditions may specify rules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Delaware Inland Bays Estuary Program (DIBEP) (IB6a)</li> <li>▪ Narragansett Bay Project (NBP) (NB4a)</li> <li>▪ Narragansett Bay Estuary Program (NBEP) (NB4d)</li> <li>▪ Tampa Bay National Estuary Program (TBNEP) (TB3a)</li> <li>▪ USDA Rural Clear Water Project (Till1)</li> <li>▪ Tillamook Bay National Estuary Program (TBNEP) (Till3a)</li> </ul>

***Self-Initiated Change Processes***

Four collaborative partnerships were self-initiated, and participants had no constraints beyond those that were self-imposed. These include the development of the *Environmental Study of Rehoboth, Indian River and Assawoman Bay* (1969) (Inland Bays); Inland Bays Study Group (IBSG), *Decisions for Delaware: Sea Grant Looks at the Inland Bays* (i.e., DE Sea Grant Report), and the TBRPC. It was common to observe self-initiated efforts that were subject to some minor constraints established by some higher-order authority. It was common to find reorientations and recreations that were self-initiated but remained subject to minor reporting and oversight constraints from a funder (e.g., EPA). There were also examples where the collaborative partnership institutionalized part of its structure in a manner that constrained how future self-initiated changes occurred.

For example, while each watershed had the flexibility to form a collaborative governance structure to implement the plan produced pursuant to the NEP, the acceptance of federal funds does subject the partnership to some minor constraints. When the TBRPC formed the ABM, it provided a great deal of autonomy, but it remains subject to oversight. Thus, while the



partnerships were self-initiated, they are subject to higher-order rules that impose a limited set of constraints, duties, or obligations. The way a collaborative process is institutionalized can also impose constraints. For example, the CIB is a nonprofit organization chartered with state legislation, which limits the speed at which some changes can occur. The interlocal agreement that forms the TBEP effectively operates as contract binding the parties. While it can be changed, this is subject to negotiation. The TEP is chartered as a Section 501 (c)3 tax exempt organization, which imposes some legal constraints in terms of what it can and cannot do. The TBNMC was also self-initiated, but it is nested within and operates subject to the TBEP's nitrogen reduction goals.

### *Externally Driven Change Processes*

The second set of change processes were externally driven due to mandates or incentives. The use of the external mandate strategy was relatively common during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s but largely gave way to an external incentive driven strategy in the 1990s and beyond. This pattern is consistent with the shift in the phases of intergovernmental relations (IGR) first observed by Wright (1988). The case data identified mandates from legislative and regulatory requirements (e.g., Section 208), directives such as executive orders from a Governor or the President, and resolutions by local governments. For example, collaborations in the Inland Bays and Narragansett Bay prepared a Section 208 plan to comply with requirements in the 1972 Clean Water Act (CWA). Delaware's Governor used an executive order to establish the GTFIB. Similarly, once it produced its report, the governor used another mandate to replace the GTFIB with the IBMC. A Presidential Executive Order initiated the NERBC. Mandates can also occur at the local level as evidenced by the Tillamook County resolution that formed the Bay Sanitation Technical Advisory Committee (BSTAC). Another interesting example is the use of a federal-state compact to structure the NEIWPC. Joining the compact required voluntary participation by the states, however, the commission itself is subject to the Compact's requirements. In each case, the mandate specified rules that provided structure to the collaborative partnership.

The most prominent example of the external incentive strategy across the four cases was the participation in the NEP. Participation was voluntary. However, a condition of participation was accepting several fundamental rules that influenced the development of the partnership structure. Each watershed was required to use a committee structure called a management conference. Members were required to make decisions based on consensus, and its purpose was defined in that it had to ultimately produce a CCMP. In return, state and local officials received money to support the collaborative processes with some hope that implementation funds would continue supporting their efforts. However, the configuration or other rules such as the selection of the problems, specification of members and their roles on committees, and level of access that stakeholders had to decision making resulted in quite different structures for the four collaborative partnerships.

The external-incentive strategy was also used to initiate change in at least one instance. While the EPA maintained a relatively "hands off" approach during the implementation process, there was one instance where the external-incentive approach was used to encourage a reorientation of the NBEP because its members feared EPA would terminate its funding.

## **Sustaining a Healthy and Useful Life**

Less clear is the linkage between developmental processes and the need to improve the health and useful life of the partnership. The concept of a healthy and useful life is used in place of more traditional terms like “success” or “performance” for several reasons (Imperial, et al. 2016). There is no generally accepted way to evaluate the performance of a collaborative partnership. This is likely due to the many ways they generate value. Moreover, they create *value* in different ways during different developmental stages (Voets *et al* 2008; Mandell & Keast 2008). Therefore, the type of nurturing needed to sustain healthy network processes during early developmental processes can be quite different from what is needed when mature networks experience declines (Genskow & Born 2006, 56).

What is interesting about these data is there were efforts that were healthy and useful over their durations (e.g., the GTFIB, IBMC, NERBC, TBNEP, TBEP, RCWP). Others never managed to get the structure right and failed to develop meaningful collaborative processes (e.g., NBP, NBEP, TCPP). There were reorientations and recreations that were clearly designed to improve the partnerships (TBEP and CIB) while others were intended to correct profound problems (TCPP and NBEP). It appears that relatively frequent changes (reorientations and recreations) were a warning sign. Conversely, long periods of partnership stability were either a sign of healthy and useful collaborative process (TBEP, CIB, and TEP) or signified that the partnership has secure resources, but it could also be relatively unhealthy (NBEP). Healthy partnerships were ended prematurely (IBMC and NERBC) while unhealthy partnerships lived way past their useful life (NBEP). In short, there was no clear linkage between the health and useful life and reorientations, recreations, or death.

However, focusing on the partnership’s health and useful life draws attention to the challenge of using traditional notions of performance (e.g., effectiveness, outputs, or outcomes) because “success” or “effectiveness” often depends upon your perspective. The DIBEP’s CCMP was nearly rejected by the EPA but this conflict actually unified state officials and interest groups and provided additional support for the plan. State officials fundamentally disagreed with EPA in terms of the substance of the CCMP. Management Committee members wanted something like prior documents such as those produced by the GTFIB and were quite happy and supportive of the final CCMP. Conversely, EPA wanted a big thick comprehensive plan that would represent the culmination of the planning process. In the end, state officials prevailed, and the EPA begrudgingly approved the Inland Bays CCMP.

The development of the CIB and its efforts over the last 25 years illustrate another way perspective matters. Arguably the CIB serves some useful purposes, however, it also failed to match the initial expectations for many stakeholders because it failed to manage population growth (and related impacts) and did not directly address nutrient runoff from agricultural operations. Accordingly, the usefulness of the DIBEP and CIB depends on your perspective. Many stakeholders were disappointed with what they perceived to be a “watered down” CCMP and a CIB that avoided controversial issues. At the same time, the strength of the competing interests related to land development and agricultural issues (e.g., poultry farms) made it highly unlikely that a binding agreement like the one crafted for Tampa Bay was possible. What

emerged instead was a pragmatic approach that allowed members to work together to produce something of value that addresses shared problems in the watershed. In this case, the members of the partnership thought something (i.e., CIB) was better than nothing.

Tillamook Bay provides another example. Its CCMP emphasized a series of measurable targets to guide implementation and ensure they moved beyond “random acts of environmental kindness” by focusing on addressing watershed problems over a period of time (Imperial 2005b). With the failure of the TCPP and shift to the TEP, this focus and the corresponding targets were no longer the focal point of implementation. In a twist of irony, implementation now consists of those same “random acts of environmental kindness” that members tried to avoid when developing the CCMP. That said, the projects have some environmental benefits, even if there are not enough of them to make a major difference in larger watershed problems. While some may be disappointed and the original CCMP’s priority targets were not achieved, that perspective ignores the reality that the TCPP failed because there was no dedicated source of funding that allowed local officials to make a sustained effort to address the problems using the targets it developed. Instead, participants essentially crafted a plan “B” and took a more pragmatic route by developing a partnership that could function given the resources and local context. Thus, the CIB and TEP arguably have had relatively healthy and useful lives even if they fell short of the original expectations.

#### ***Is it Possible to Avoid the Decline in the Health of a Collaborative Partnership?***

While these data do not allow for precise estimates of the shape of the curves depicted in Figure 4, the results are relatively consistent with the life-cycle hypothesis that at some point, even stable and healthy collaborations will incur some modest decline in their usefulness while others may fall into a slow steady period of decline. This finding was also supported by Ulibarri and her colleagues (2020). Decline was often reflected in reduced frequency of meetings, excessive turnover, reduced scope of activity, tempered ambitions, and narrowing of purposes over time. In extreme cases, the partnership experienced a period of slumber where little collaborative activity occurred (e.g., NBEP).

While the declines in Figure 2 are depicted as smooth lines, they are likely better illustrated as wavy lines due to bursts of health (or slumber) such that the health and usefulness of the partnership fluctuates even though the overall trend seems to slowly (or rapidly) decline. The wavy pattern in health and usefulness was evident to some degree in all four watersheds but these variations did not appear to be linked in any way to change processes. Rather, the pattern seems to correspond to changes in staff, differences in leadership, better or more secure funding, new or improved ways of delivering services, and natural turnover in the individuals representing the partner organizations. In other words, management of the collaborative partnership seems to matter. Partnerships need constant nurturing and support using the strategies noted in Table 5.

While additional research needs to be done to better test the hypothesis that collaborative governance is likely to experience some period of decline (Ulibarri, et al. 2020; Imperial, et al.

**Table 5: Ways to Sustain Healthy Collaborative Partnerships**

	<b>Stages of Development</b>			
	<i>Activation</i>	<i>Collectivity</i>	<i>Institutionalization</i>	<i>Stability, Decline, or Change</i>
<b>Key Features of Each Stage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Membership is a bit unstable</li> <li>▪ Focus is on figuring out what the partnership can do</li> <li>▪ Differentiate roles of the partnership from that of its members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High member cohesion develops</li> <li>▪ Partnership has a distinct identity</li> <li>▪ Focus of discussions shifts from what to do to how to do it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stable membership, processes, and resources</li> <li>▪ Process is not dependent on individuals</li> <li>▪ Focus is on fine-tuning processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Stability and members resist proposals for change</li> <li>▪ Resource streams are relatively secure</li> <li>▪ Few founding members are still involved</li> </ul>
<b>Stage-Specific Symptoms of Unhealthy Collaborative Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Poor attendance at meetings</li> <li>▪ Members do not seem to do more than attend the meetings</li> <li>▪ Difficulty finding a focal problem to motivate participation</li> <li>▪ A lot of overlap with existing organizations or partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unstable membership and decision processes</li> <li>▪ Meetings are filled with conflict</li> <li>▪ Asymmetries of power within the partnership</li> <li>▪ Members unwilling to invest much more than their time at meetings</li> <li>▪ Focus shifts to what to do before relationship building occurs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Departures of key individuals is viewed as a crisis</li> <li>▪ Unstable membership, processes, or resource streams</li> <li>▪ Maintaining the partnership becomes a goal rather than getting things done</li> <li>▪ Entrenchment stifles partnership's capacity to innovate or adapt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Departures of key individuals is viewed as a crisis</li> <li>▪ Resistance to change when change is needed</li> <li>▪ Members exit or stop committing resources</li> <li>▪ Mission drift</li> <li>▪ Excessive member turnover</li> <li>▪ A lot of social loafing and free-riding</li> <li>▪ New problems command members attention</li> </ul>
<b>Stage-Specific Tactics Used to Nurture Collaborative Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Focus on attracting the right members and their leaders</li> <li>▪ Give thought to what members to include and when to incorporate them into the partnership</li> <li>▪ Be deliberative and plan the partnership's development</li> <li>▪ Small group of collaborative leaders are needed to "champion" the partnership's development</li> <li>▪ Allow network's collaborative culture to develop organically; expect and protect the time it takes for this to occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Facilitate and nurture member interactions</li> <li>▪ Create space for dialog</li> <li>▪ Take time needed to build relationships and a stable process</li> <li>▪ Ensure members participate as equals within network processes</li> <li>▪ Clear rules regarding membership and processes</li> <li>▪ Leadership is distributed among many members</li> <li>▪ Members share credit and avoid placing blame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Rules structuring network processes are clearly described (e.g., websites, documents, by-laws)</li> <li>▪ New members are quickly socialized to new rules</li> <li>▪ Develop new processes to streamline decision making</li> <li>▪ Leadership is distributed among many members</li> <li>▪ Members share credit and avoid placing blame</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Do not ignore signs of prolonged decline</li> <li>▪ Periodic efforts to focus or refocus on mission</li> <li>▪ Disband, re-orient, or re-create if a better use of partners resources</li> <li>▪ Small group of collaborative leaders are needed to "champion" re-orientations</li> <li>▪ Leaders able to seek external input to evaluate partnership's effectiveness</li> <li>▪ Members share credit and avoid placing blame</li> </ul>

Modified from: Imperial, et al. 2016

2016; Mandell and Keast 2008; Sydow 2004), these findings and prior research provide some explanation to support this hypothesis. Members experience “burnout” because the energy and commitment they put into their roles in the partnership cannot be sustained indefinitely (Huxham and Vangen 2000, 1161). Members and support staff move jobs, get promotions, and retire and that can disrupt processes. Once stability is achieved, members often feel it is safe to “pass the baton” and let others represent their organization. This pattern was observed across many of the collaborative partnerships. New members soon begin to dominate network membership and their level of personal commitment and priorities may be quite different than the founders. Mission drift can occur due to incremental shifts in programmatic focus as members chase scarce resources or funders change priorities (Auer *et al.* 2011). While the CIB and TEP have arguably experienced this mission drift, drifting provides resources needed for survival.

Other declines are due to group dynamics. The challenge Narragansett Bay had during the NBP and NBEP was that their group dynamics have mostly been dysfunctional, and this contributed to the rapid decline in health and usefulness regardless of the partnership’s structure. After the excitement and challenge of initial formation wears off, the likelihood of “social loafing” increases (Wageman 1999; Williams *et al.* 1981). Others may “free ride” by reaping the benefits of membership while decreasing their participation and commitments. While it is unclear from these data the extent to which this occurred, one of the main reasons the TBEP invested considerable time in negotiating the interlocal agreement and its binding commitments was to explicitly prevent “free-riding” and “social loafing behavior.

Some of the waviness also appears linked to factors such as changes in funding availability and other macro-economic forces (e.g., the great recession). Problems that once motivated network participation get displaced as new issues command the attention of members. In short, members increasingly view the partnership’s useful life in terms of the opportunity costs of their continued participation (Mandell and Keast 2008, 726). As a result, members may seek opportunities to achieve a greater return on their investments by deploying their resources elsewhere, perhaps in another partnership to address other watershed problems. Accordingly, some of bursts of activity and periods of quick decline seem to reflect response to natural fluctuations in the partnership’s external environment that create strategic opportunities and challenges in terms of finding funding to support their activities.

It is also obvious that external actors can keep collaborative processes alive by providing necessary resources, regardless of the partnership’s actual health and usefulness. In other words, you can clearly “buy” collaborative partnerships, but it does not mean that the money is well spent. When comparing the CIB, NBEP, TBEP, and TEP it is important to recognize that all still receive considerable financial resources from the EPA and their state counterparts due to their participation in the National Estuary Program (NEP). What would happen if this funding was terminated? It is highly likely that the NBEP would cease to exist. Despite repeated attempts to reorient and recreate itself, it remains relatively unhealthy and fails to provide much in the way of public value. At the other end of the spectrum is the TBEP. It would exist without EPA funding and was built to have a sustaining source of local funding built into interlocal agreement. In fact, only about 25% of its funding comes from federal sources and it maintains a very healthy fund balance. It is less clear what would happen with the CIB and TEP. The CIB recently developed a finance plan that is oriented towards trying to ensure its sustainability and its

funding sources are better diversified than the TEP. The TEP situation is much more tenuous and heavily reliant on federal funding. Accordingly, the CIB would be in a much better position to survive this funding loss. Thus, EPA maintains a critical role in sustaining the survival of two of the four collaborative partnerships. However, if EPA let them die it might be possible that new partnerships emerged in this collaborative space that were more productive.

## **Discussion**

The results demonstrate that change occurs and is self-initiated or externally driven. However, there is no guarantee that the reoriented or recreated partnerships produce better results as evidenced by the experiences in Narragansett Bay and Tillamook Bay. Instead, these data provide modest support for notion that recreations are risky because they rob the partnership of its history and reset the “liability of newness” clock back to zero (Amburgey et al., 1999, 53; Singh et al., 1986, 589; Hannan & Freeman 1984, 160; Stinchcombe 1965). Other empirical studies provide relatively consistent support for this basic proposition in organizational (e.g., Amburgey et al. 1993; Bruderl & Schussler 1990; Gray & Ariss 1985; Singh et al., 1986; Freeman et al., 1983) and network settings (Koka et al., 2006; Burt 2002). The lesson is clear. Change is risky but sometimes necessary. It also requires a significant investment in time and resources to revisit developmental challenges.

Deciding when to end a collaborative partnership is also a difficult, but often necessary choice, regardless of whether it is self-initiated or externally driven. Some healthy partnerships end prematurely while unhealthy partnerships endure long after their useful life ended. Unfortunately, this question remains largely unexplored by researchers. Further complicating matters is that while reorientations are typically viewed in positive terms, participants and external actors often view recreations (e.g., shift from the NBP to NBEP, shift from TCPP to TEP) in negative terms as failures. The positive view of reorientations likely stems from the fact that they are relatively minor changes designed to produce positive improvements with lower perceived costs. Conversely, recreations involve the untimely termination and replacement of valued partnerships while others viewed termination as a “stigma” of failure.

Avoiding recreations due to a “stigma” of failure is particularly problematic. It prevents the partnership’s resources from being allocated to more productive purposes. It also keeps new partnerships from emerging in the collaborative space. However, when properly timed or planned, these data suggest that death can be quite constructive. Perhaps the best example are the various task forces or study commissions that focused on using a collaborative process to produce a report that elevated attention to watershed problems and provided recommendations to address them. While they varied in terms of their usefulness (e.g., impact), there was often little reason for them to continue once their mission was complete. Other deaths were less constructive. While the DIBEP provided a great opportunity to address watershed problem, its creation led to the demise of the IBMC, which was quite healthy and productive. It is interesting to ponder what would have happened if the resources provided by EPA in the Inland Bays had been allocated to the IBMC to continue its work rather than start the DIBEP.

Another interesting implication for theory development is that there were few purely self-initiated collaborative processes that were not subject to internally or externally imposed

constraints. Members of a partnership are often subject to rules that constrain what they can and cannot do, which in turn influences what the collaborative watershed partnership can accomplish. Collaborations also emerge because individual members lack critical resources needed to address watershed problems. As a result, they are dependent on funding from other sources such as government, the private sector, or even a foundation. However, funders can impose constraints on what can or cannot be done with these resources or can control how work gets done. The consequence is that external actors may deliberately or inadvertently establish mandates (e.g., legislation, executive order) or incentives (e.g., NEP planning grants) that shape the partnership's structure.

### *Lessons for Using Collaborative Governance as a Policy Tool*

The findings also demonstrate that collaborative governance has long been used as a policy tool to develop and implement public policy (Imperial 2021; Scott & Thomas 2017; Imperial, et al. 2017). The externally driven experiences provide lessons for using this meta-governance strategy. Externally initiated partnerships work best when they are strategic, focused, and have a clear task or mission that is in alignment with the local context. One of the problems with the National Estuary Program (NEP) is it required a final plan that was truly “comprehensive” instead of letting participants develop “strategic” plans built around a set of shared goals or objectives to stimulate action. Externally driven partnerships also work best when there is a lot of flexibility to create a structure that is aligned with the local context. The EPA required consensus and a collaborative process with lots of involvement with decision making typically driven by larger management committees comprised of agency and stakeholder representatives. This combination of rules worked in Tillamook Bay but fostered a highly dysfunctional process in Narragansett Bay. In the Inland Bays, reaching “consensus” involved negotiating to the lowest common denominator as it was harder to reach agreement on some issues. Tampa Bay, which was arguably the most healthy and productive of the four NEPs, instead opted for a much more highly engaged policy committee that placed primary decision-making authority initially in the hands of 6 local governments and 3 agencies so that they could negotiate clear goals and targets. However, this process was less inclusive.

Another lesson is the problematic nature of imposing standardized rules or partnership structure because participants need flexibility to craft a partnership structure that “fits” the local context. Each watershed has a history that generated expectations among members in terms of how to solve collective problems. Tampa Bay approached the NEP as it had other regional issues. However, the NEP was a very different approach to problem solving in the Inland Bays and Tillamook Bay. Interestingly, when their plans were completed both watersheds returned to structures and processes that resembled earlier partnerships. Conversely, there appears to be a mismatch of scale in Narragansett Bay. There is a much richer history of collaborative governance efforts than is depicted in Table 3. However, most are targeted at sub-basins within the watershed with focal problems that motivate state and local participation in collaborative problem-solving (Imperial, et al. 2017). The larger watershed simply lacks that central organizing issue or problem to capture attention.

Another lesson is that externally driven partnerships need clear expectations to drive partnership creation, so it is clear what they are expected to produce. One of the interesting

things the Governor of Delaware did was to use an executive order to establish the GTFIB with a clear mission – produce a report with recommendations, and rather quickly. The Governor then established the IBMC to oversee implementation for a designated period (i.e., 5 years) with the promise of some financial support. The predictability of funding and a designated timeframe for action was a useful strategy because participants had clear expectations in terms of the time and resource commitments as well as some urgency to address the 41 recommendations in the GTFIB report. Contrast that strategy with the NEP where it wanted a large expansive CCMP but had no real expectations or timeframes for implementation and then EPA proceeded funding the implementation of outdated plans for a decade or more.

The Section 208 program provides another cautionary tale. This CWA requirement stimulated countless collaborative planning processes around the country. Some Section 208 plans developed truly innovative ideas and recommendations including Narragansett Bay's (Imperial, et al. 2017). However, implementation efforts withered because the efforts were poorly funded by the EPA and Congress, which led to their termination in 1981. The lesson is clear. You can use a mandate or incentivize the planting of hundreds of new gardens. But why do that when at some point you plan to turn the water off and let everything that started growing wither and die. That is not an effective way to nurture and sustain healthy collaborative partnerships. A much more effective strategy is to encourage the planting of gardens that can sustain themselves over time by finding a new water source.

## **Conclusion**

When viewed over decades, it is easy to appreciate the dynamic nature of collaboration and how partnerships evolve and change, only to occasionally die and be replaced by new efforts to address watershed problems. Partnerships expand or contract membership, change geographic focus, rebrand, and modify missions and strategic purposes. The health and usefulness of the partnerships also varies over time. Some experience rapid decline while others remain relatively healthy and useful for long periods. Partnerships experience occasional bursts of activity or go through periods of slumber.

The focus on the health and usefulness of a partnership is important because it draws attention to the functional and strategic nature of collaborative governance. Collaborative partnerships emerge to fulfill some purpose that cannot be achieved by actors working alone (Imperial, et al. 2018). While collaborative processes are best left to develop at their own pace, they should also die when their useful life has passed to free up scarce resources and put them to more productive purposes (Imperial et al. 2016). The paper provides several examples where partnerships were disbanded after their useful life ended. When the useful life of the collaborative process declines, it is time to disband, reorient, or recreate the network to allow network resources to be redeployed in new ways. Unfortunately, many participants appear reluctant to think in those terms. Instead, they escalate their commitment to prolong a collaborative process whose useful lives are marked by prolonged decline.

It is also clear that developmental dynamics create a paradoxical tension in collaborative partnerships (Ospina & Saz-Carranza 2010; Imperial 2005b). The need for flexible and innovative approaches to watershed problem solving often drives partnership creation whether



the efforts are self-initiated or externally driven (Imperial 1999a). Conversely, the spontaneous order that emerges from the partnership's structure allows members to deploy resources in a coordinated fashion to achieve results that cannot be achieved by working alone or at the direction of central hierarchical planning authority (Hayek 1945). However, achieving order requires partnerships to develop relatively stable structures that resist change (Kim et al., 2006, 705; Hannan & Freeman 1984, 149). Indeed, there are several examples of relatively stable partnerships that endured for relatively long periods. Some were relatively healthy (e.g., CIB, TBEP, TEP) while others were unhealthy (e.g., NBEP). Both the theory and practice of collaboration need to better understand this tension between stability and the need for change.

Developmental dynamics are likely one reason why scholars continue to argue that collaboration theory generally lags behind practice (Prentice, et al. 2019; Bryson, et al. 2016; McGuire 2002). Indeed, any comprehensive theory of collaborative governance will have to account for developmental dynamics. Our hope is that understanding the developmental dynamics of collaborative partnerships will lead to better guidance in terms of when reorientations, recreations, or terminations of collaborative partnerships should occur. Scholars also need to provide better guidance in terms of the strategies that can be used in different developmental stages to improve the healthy and useful life of collaborative partnerships.

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