Achieving Sustainable Development Together

PROGRESS THROUGH PROCESS

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A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT

Canada

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The notion of sustainable development which burst into public consciousness a generation ago was welcomed with great optimism by governments and peoples around the globe. It was based on the idea that environmental protection and economic prosperity could and should be pursued in tandem to safeguard the needs of future generations.

It was easier said than done. Too much attention was paid to seeking the 'perfect' solution; too little was paid to considering how best to get there. Now, too often, views have hardened into positions, interests have become barricades, and rhetoric has replaced dialogue. However it happened, the goals of sustainable development have become more difficult to achieve – for all of us.

We need to get back to basics including figuring out how to talk to one another - how to leverage the need and desire for debate and discussion into accepted and effective processes for sustainable development governance.

Seized with this challenge, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy and the Public Policy Forum brought together 20 leading experts and practitioners in the sustainability and public policy fields last fall to consider ways to improve governance methods for sustainable development. We concluded that traditional governance approaches are no longer sufficient in the '2.0 world'; that by using updated collaborative methods, we can break down deep-rooted positions which often prevent sustainable development policies from being enacted. We believe that stakeholders, citizens and governments must come together utilizing innovative collaborative models, and that we all have larger and more responsible roles to play.

Today, more than ever, integrating economic development and environmental stewardship is crucial to safeguarding the world for our children. Issues like climate change, national energy strategies, and water management are among the greatest challenges of our generation. As presidents and CEOs of our respective organizations, we are proud to present this report to Canadians interested in making sustainable development more than a phrase.

We want to thank each of the participants who gave their time and insights to this project.

Sincerely,

David McLaughlin
President and CEO
The National Round Table on the
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Achieving Sustainable Development Together

Sustainable development means that economic, social and environmental goals can be – must be – pursued in tandem. It is not simply a question of "balancing" environment and economy as competing interests. Rather, sustainable development means finding ways in which they can be integrated so that our prosperity and a healthy environment go together.

This is an optimistic vision, and achieving that vision requires not just different policies but also different policy processes. We—the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) and the Public Policy Forum (PPF)—began this project because we believe that achieving sustainable development requires a governance agenda that is more collaborative; engages governments, stakeholders, and citizens at the same table; and helps governments solve problems jointly.

Governments in Canada often struggle with sustainable development issues. They are uniquely complex: they straddle departments, involve long time frames, and comprise many urgent interconnected issues. On many fronts – climate change, energy, land-use, water, urban development, and others – progress gets bogged down by entrenched interests and adversarial posturing. Governments, which need to take decisions, must navigate between competing claims and deliver on their electoral commitments while upholding the public interest. Yet we also see instances where stakeholders have overcome their differences to collaborate with government and each other on solutions. These positive examples helped inspire this joint PPF-NRTEE project.

Driven by a desire to step back from the day-to-day tangle of disagreement and debate on sustainability issues in Canada, we sought to consider how we might forge a more effective path forward for sustainable development through collaborative governance and engagement. We put forward the view that sustainability requires specially crafted governance mechanisms to navigate through difficult issues and to create a more integrated perspective within our governments and society on how to achieve sustainability. Our discussions began with the premise that different views must be brought together and integrated within a process if we are to make progress on sustainable development.

In doing so, we recognize that calls for greater openness, collaboration, and engagement in government are not new. As long ago as 1993, the NRTEE recognized that *"Conventional decision-making mechanisms tend to exclude rather than include diverse interests and do not cope well with the complexity of issues that sustainability presents."* Indeed, the insight that sustainable development requires differing interests be brought together was the principle on which the NRTEE was founded. Since its establishment 22 years ago, the NRTEE has successfully developed a policy advice model in which consensus reports provide a rational, reasoned consideration of sustainable development issues that represent a broad range of views.

The Public Policy Forum has a similar story to tell. Since 1987, it has provided a "safe space" for government officials and stakeholders to meet and discuss issues and options that might be too sensitive to discuss in traditional government forums. More recently, PPF has been working with governments to develop models for more collaborative decision-making processes.

This joint NRTEE-PPF collaborative process brought together 20 leading Canadian experts and practitioners in sustainability and public policy to consider how more collaborative governance and broader engagement processes might lead to effective progress on sustainable development. Our goals were twofold:

1. Understand the potential for effective engagement mechanisms and processes to improve the governance of sustainable development in Canada.

2. Develop ideas, recommendations, and strategies for improved engagement practices of the NRTEE and similar organizations.

Through two roundtable discussions and a series of one-on-one interviews, we asked these experts for their views on whether our diagnosis is right: Is there a governance problem for sustainable development in Canada? How can collaboration and engagement improve public policy for sustainable development?

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: *"MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE PRESENT WITHOUT COMPROMISING THE ABILITY OF FUTURE GENERATIONS TO MEET THEIR OWN NEEDS" – Brundtland Commission*

This report sets out what we learned from the discussion, and highlights quotes from the dialogue throughout. More specifically, it sets out our thoughts on why collaboration matters and how successful collaborative processes work. It draws two main conclusions from our discussions.

First, participants agreed that public policy on sustainable development in Canada is suffering because traditional governance approaches are no longer sufficient for today's complex world and pluralistic society. They agreed that there is room for progress, and that collaborative governance approaches offer a promising way forward on sustainable development in Canada.

Second, participants offered the view that those concerned with public policy on sustainable development shouldn't always wait for government to lead. On some issues, positions have become so polarized and entrenched that governments are not always best placed to break the logjam. We heard that in such cases policy or advisory organizations like PPF and NRTEE can play a critical role as neutral conveners and facilitators of a dialogue that tries to reframe key issues and move stakeholders away from entrenched positions. In this way, a more open public policy space can be created to facilitate progress.

GOVERNANCE: **THE PROCESSES AND INSTITUTIONS THROUGH WHICH SOCIETY MAKES AND IMPLEMENTS PUBLIC POLICY DECISIONS. THIS INCLUDES THE RANGE OF POLITICAL, ORGANIZATIONAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES INVOLVED IN THE MAKING AND IMPLEMENTING OF PUBLIC POLICY DECISIONS, AND HOW DECISION-MAKERS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE.**

02

Setting Out The Governance Challenge

The central idea behind sustainable development is that economic prosperity and environmental protection are compatible when pursued the right way. This is not the usual way of looking at them. Too often, sustainable development is approached as a zero-sum game in which the environment and economy are competing interests. When one gains, the other loses. In this view, the best policy makers can hope for is a good "balance" between the two.

In fact, the environment and economy can be—and often are—mutually enhancing. We see this, for example, in the development of new green technologies, such as wind power or carbon sequestration, which also provide promising opportunities for new economic growth.

The challenge for sustainable development is to align these allegedly competing interests in new and creative ways that allow us to pursue them in tandem. To do so, we need to seriously look at equally new and creative ways of collaborative governance. If Canadians don't want to choose between prosperity and ecology, between economy and environment, then we have to consider creating governance mechanisms that are uniquely crafted for the distinct nature of sustainable development issues. We need to find better ways of aligning or integrating interests in ways that lead to sustainable development. Otherwise it will prove enduringly difficult to overcome the polarization and lack of trust that too often permeates environment-economy discussions.

We argue—and our participants agreed—that a key part of the problem lies in the structures and institutions through which sustainable development issues are considered. *"Current governance structures reinforce old conversations,"* was how one participant put it. Government invites an airing of views and offers to listen, but typically maintains the final decision-making authority. At the extreme, this degenerates into a winner-take-all style of discussion and debate, pitting one interest against another, as people feel compelled to compete for government's ear.

> *"[On environmental issues] many people have become entrenched on one side or the other of the issue— they are either for the environment or for the economy."*

> *"Thirty per cent of people think the solution is to stop growth, that it is impossible to have growth and preserve the environment. Fifteen per cent say that they don't care about the environment; they just want growth for today. The remainder want green growth. In their view, leaders in both government and outside government are dropping the ball."*

If we want this to change, we need to rethink how governments engage stakeholders. We must redesign engagement processes so that they reward stakeholders for being flexible, deliberate, and thoughtful. The way to encourage positive stakeholder behaviour is to give stakeholders a greater say in defining the solutions, which they will view as a better way to advance their interests. But in exchange, they must make a serious commitment to a real dialogue process with other stakeholders, aimed at finding truly sustainable solutions—that is, solutions that accommodate their respective interests by aligning and integrating them in new ways. In a nutshell, such a process is designed to encourage stakeholders to stop competing and start collaborating.

This is not to say that such processes will always succeed; there are often real, irreconcilable differences. Where no consensus is possible, government is obliged to decide on the basis of a broader public interest having heard information and views. Nevertheless, new opportunities for integration and alignment are emerging. With the right process and commitment, stakeholders who view one another as competitors—even rivals—often begin to discover common ground.

This kind of collaboration acknowledges that the capacity of governments is limited, but in doing so, it takes nothing away from the role of government. Sustainable development issues, such as climate change, biodiversity, and air quality, are complex in the sense that no single department or government can manage them alone. Successful governance for sustainable development should include the participation of stakeholders and ultimately, the public—both in finding *and* in implementing the right solutions. In effect, collaborative processes simply ask stakeholders to recognize and accept that they have a real role to play alongside government in finding and implementing solutions to such problems.

"Sustainable development is multi-faceted, incredibly complex, involves problems of uncertainty and risk, engages real material interests, and has a very long-term perspective."

"The environment is an economic issue – in fact it is a key economic issue."

"The fundamental architecture of government, which operates in silos, does not fit into today's horizontal world of increasing speed, increasing interconnectivity, and problems that don't respect boundaries."

The rest of this report sets out our response to this governance challenge. First, we illustrate some of the ways in which government, industry, communities, and citizens in Canada have responded to this challenge. We highlight some lessons learned. In doing so, we make the case for collaborative models of governance that bring stakeholders together with government as partners for making and implementing sustainable development policy. We then outline what we see as the essential elements of successful collaborative governance for sustainable development.

"Sustainable development goes to a higher level of complexity and interrelatedness. At this level, some of the normal policy tools do not work well."

"We can learn from forestry. Where the forestry industry was once seen as existing in opposition to sustainability, Canada is now the world leader in producing managed, sustainable forest products. No other country has more acreage under FSC certification. Canada is now on the way to figuring out seafood. Understanding those successes and applying those principles to other resource sectors is key to achieving sustainability."

03

Responding To
the Challenge

Governments and stakeholders have responded to this collaborative engagement challenge in a number of ways, sometimes successfully, sometimes less so.

We explored some of the central lessons from these experiences. We discussed both the principles and the practice of collaborative governance, drawing on examples ranging from municipalities that engage their citizens in setting out a shared vision for the future of the community, to partnerships involving government, industry, and civil society groups in collaborative management. We also invited four participants to share case studies of how collaboration and engagement have been used to advance public policy in Canada. This section sets out key considerations for success: choosing when to collaborate, learning to share authority, ensuring clarity in the process, finding the right participants, building legitimacy, involving citizens, and finally, acknowledging the inherent challenges.

CHOOSING WHEN TO COLLABORATE

The experiences of collaborative governance for sustainable development in Canada suggest that such processes can lead to better policy outcomes than more traditional government-led approaches. However, collaboration and engagement are not always the most effective approach. Collaboration and engagement should be seen as one part—albeit an important part—of a broader governance framework for sustainable development. So when is collaboration a good idea for sustainable development issues? Three lessons, described below, emerged from our discussions.

1. When there is a practical question on which collaboration can produce actionable results

Collaboration and engagement processes work best when there is a clear, practical focus for decisions and action. When collaboration focuses on clear outcomes, participants have a real stake in the issue and a sense of ownership of the solution. This helps ensure that they will identify and commit to real actions to implement the decisions made by the group. A practical and outcome-oriented focus helps participants understand why they are there and what they can hope to achieve collectively. It helps provide a clear logic for their participation.

> *"Transformational change is needed. I am seeing it in government. People at decision-making tables within government recognize that the status quo no longer works and that it is necessary to change the way one does business. Almost everything is now being done on a cross-ministry basis."*

> *"We have to be clear about when to use a collaborative process. When used appropriately, it can be stunningly successful in motivating and galvanizing people to reach a shared understanding of an issue. But it can also be the wrong tool."*

Furthermore, the participants in a collaborative venture must all be in a position to act on the resulting action plan—and must be seen to be in a position to do so. Unless the participants believe that each is engaging in good faith in the dialogue, and can implement the decisions made, it will be impossible to make real progress. This is challenging for all stakeholders: *"What differentiates collaboration is that it involves taking a risk. All parties have to agree to buy into the group decision and then sell it back to their individual constituencies. This level of commitment to a good outcome separates collaborative engagement from other processes."* In other words, all participants must have real flexibility in determining options. Their hands must not be too closely tied by prior commitments or positions that are non-negotiable. *"All parties to a meaningful process have to be flexible and sincere. There has to be political will and interest in actually making a decision."*

2. When participants can agree to work together to find a solution

Second, collaboration requires that all participants come together with a constructive and committed attitude. Collaboration only works when participants can agree to engage in good faith and do so.

Often, this kind of commitment to a collaborative process happens because there is an existing level of trust among the governments and stakeholders involved. But sometimes, collaboration can be effective when things seem to be at their worst. Perhaps this seems counter-intuitive, but when all sides feel a sense of urgency that something must be done, they often find the will to engage with those they have previously seen as adversaries. The key here is that everyone must feel the process is fair and respectful of their interests.

In agreeing to work together to find a common solution, participants must commit to pursue their goals *first and foremost* through the collaborative process. Stakeholders in a collaborative dialogue should not agree to participate if at the same time they continue to lobby governments behind closed doors. Experience shows that

"The project or issue for collaboration should be real and have the possibility of producing a result. That way, the partners in the collaboration are in a relationship that matters. Collaboration cannot just be a talking shop. A truly collaborative process must have a practical focus."

"Perhaps it's not coincidental that where the problems and challenges are the most acute, stakeholders share the urgency of moving forward."

if participants view the collaborative initiative as only one among many routes to achieving their goals, there is a risk they will be less committed, and the collaborative process is less likely to succeed.

3. When an issue requires long-term and ongoing collaboration

Third, collaborative approaches can be particularly well suited to long-term issues. This is partly because focusing on immediate, short-term decisions is likely to highlight the differences between different interests. Focusing on long-term issues highlights the principles and values on which participants are more likely to find common ground.

Long-term issues are also most appropriate for practical reasons. Collaboration works best when it is ongoing and iterative, not a one-off process. Collaborative governance requires some level of trust between the government bodies, businesses, and civil society groups involved. Trust can take time to build, and long-term and ongoing collaboration enables the development of trust by increasing mutual understanding and building on a record of achievement.

Furthermore, collaborative initiatives that address long-term issues enable evaluation, learning, and readjustment as time goes on. This is important: most sustainable development policy areas require continuous recalibration, not one-off decisions. As one participant put it, *"we are now into a vibrant, dynamic, and living policy-making environment. Policies have to be nimble and responsive."* Long-term and ongoing collaborative processes enable learning from past mistakes and the incorporation of new information. Most sustainable development policies are based at least in part on research from the scientists who study the environment. Policy processes, like the science on which they draw, must continually learn, evolve, and adapt to new information.

"The principles piece is one most people can rally around. The values and principles part become a way to find common ground."

"The knowledge that the process has a future changes the behaviour of the participants. The more people realize that they are involved over a long timeframe, the easier it becomes to think about and adjust to change."

CASE STUDY 1. THE MUNICIPAL EXPERIENCE: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN GUELPH

Karen Farbridge, Mayor of Guelph, presented the City's experience with engaging the community in planning and urban development decisions.

Urban growth, densification and sprawl can be contentious issues in many communities, and people understandably have strong feelings about how their local communities should grow and change. Air quality, local parks and biodiversity, congestion, waste and recycling, energy and clean water are all important local sustainable development issues with national and even global implications. Since 2002, the City of Guelph has engaged its citizens directly in decisions around planning and urban development. Some engagement processes have been run by the City, others have been designed, managed and led directly by citizens. Most recently, the city ran a public engagement process to inform Guelph's Local Growth Management Strategy, which aimed to bring the City's existing planning strategy into conformity with the Province of Ontario's regional growth plans. The process ran through six stages, each engaging citizens in different ways: asking for their concerns, their design recommendations, and an exploration of the values and principles that should guide the City's development decisions. The City ran surveys, interactive online modelling tools, in-person workshops and design charrettes, focus groups and other mechanisms.

LESSONS LEARNED: The process successfully arrived at a clearly preferred and realistic growth plan that promised to incorporate projected growth while recognizing the values and concerns of citizens, demonstrating that a community can help governments reach a clear view on how a plan should develop. It helped that the engagement strategies were rewarding and even fun for those involved, enabling citizens to feel a sense of shared responsibility and vision for their community. But the process has not been without difficulties. In particular, while the plan was broadly endorsed and accepted by the 1,500 or more direct citizen participants, implementation has generated some resistance, with some citizens rejecting urban intensification plans and asserting that they have not been consulted. The experience demonstrates that even well-managed and extensive community engagement efforts do not guarantee easy implementation.

LEARNING TO SHARE AUTHORITY

Learning to share authority in decision making is central to effective collaborative engagement processes, because collaboration—unlike consultation—requires all participants to take responsibility and accountability for their decisions. In a traditional consultation, the decision regarding which solutions will be adopted and the responsibility for implementing them rests solely with the government. By contrast, a collaborative governance approach recognizes that many problems cannot be solved by government alone. Governments need a process that allows them to work together with others as partners in developing and implementing public policy solutions for sustainable development.

In such a process the participants engage in a dialogue that moves through three stages: *views, deliberation,* and *action.* When they get to the action stage, rather than turning the task of implementing solutions back over to government, participants work together to allocate roles and responsibilities according to who is best positioned to take on which tasks. Once this is done, they are expected to assume responsibility for carrying out the tasks they have been assigned. The result is an action plan that distributes roles and responsibilities among all the participants and establishes a shared accountability for results. Government is not simply left "on the hook."

Asking government to enter into a collaborative partnership poses important questions about accountability, and about government's role in promoting the public interest. Does collaboration blur government's accountability or weaken its authority? *"Ministers cannot delegate the authority and responsibility they have to interpret the public interest. They can delegate the authority to provide recommendations, to create strategy and so on—but no multi-stakeholder entity will be a complete proxy for public interest,"* stated one of our participants.

"Consultations are seen by many as being unfair; many times stake-holders do not feel that their views were heard or considered fairly."

"When one brings diverse interests together and frames the conversation properly, a lot of the demonization disappears and makes way for constructive dialogue."

"It's important to recognize what collaboration is not: collaboration is not consultation—the two are not the same, even though consultation is often dressed up as collaboration."

But there is a good case to be made that collaboration is not about asking governments to cede authority to stakeholders. It is about asking governments to exercise that authority differently. If governments and stakeholders are to align their activities around common goals, they must learn *to make decisions together,* rather than control—or cajole—one another. Collaborative processes are about building the machinery, skills, and culture that will make this possible. From this perspective, they should neither offend nor worry anyone who believes government can and should provide real leadership on key public issues and goals. It makes sense to establish a process that allows government to exercise that leadership and bring people together to help them fulfill it.

Ultimately then, this is a question of ensuring that the accountabilities are clear within any collaborative initiative. Ministers must remain accountable for commitments made in a collaborative process, just as they are accountable for decisions and actions they take themselves and on behalf of their departments. By the same token, the business, environmental, and community groups and others around the table must also be held to account for the commitments they make in any collaborative process. This is not about weakening the accountabilities within governance, but about ensuring that accountabilities are clearly and appropriately shared among collaborating partners.

"It's safe to say that most governments do consultation, some do deliberation. We see a need to move to collaboration."

"Government cannot continue to be the saviour and owner of all these initiatives. It's not that government is broken, it's at an evolutionary stage at which it's necessary to examine all the processes and ask if they still work today when there has to be some kind of alliance or partnership between business, government, and the NGO community in a way that brings a meaningful conversation to the table."

Gord Lambert, Vice President, Sustainable Development at Suncor, presented the experiences from a successful collaborative governance process to manage air quality in Alberta.

Alberta's Clean Air Strategic Alliance (CASA) was founded in 1994 as a multi-stakeholder partnership to manage air quality issues. At the time of its inception, it was recognized that circumstances would change: scientific understanding of air quality issues would evolve, economic activities would develop, and society would change too. In response, it was decided that an effective governance process was more important than an air quality plan or management strategy.

CASA's governance framework, which was informed by the NRTEE's work on consensus decision making, adopts a process in which 23 stakeholder organizations collaboratively make recommendations to the Minister of Environment on air management issues. Formal accountability remains with the Minister, but since 1994, the Minister has always accepted CASA's recommendations, illustrating that the alliance has successfully depoliticized the issue and established a trusted, legitimate, and accountable collaborative governance mechanism.

The Alliance has been a successful model that has enabled learning from the environmental community about the needs of business and learning on the part of industry about the environmental consequences of their activities. The collaborative process has enabled a shift from a focus on setting and reaching static standards to a focus on continual improvement in the management of air quality.

LESSONS LEARNED: Collaborative governance can be very successful for sustainable development issues. Good process design and clarity about the rules and processes under which CASA operates have been key to this success. *"You can't just throw 23 stakeholder groups into a room and tell them to solve a problem"*. The Minister of Environment backed the Alliance, providing it with the credibility and legitimacy necessary to make progress. For more information, go to www.casahome.org.

GETTING CLARITY IN THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Whenever governments engage in collaboration, process design is critical to success. This message emerged repeatedly during our discussions. Yet we also heard that the lessons are not being learned. Too often, governments and others are reinventing the wheel and failing to build on past experiences.

"At the end of the day, though, someone has to be responsible for making a decision and thus someone has to be accountable."

The overarching message on process design was simple: Clarity is essential. Often, clarity on what the process entails is as important as details of the process itself. Without clarity, a process is likely to flounder amid frustrated expectations and disappointed hopes. Our discussions highlighted four areas that must be clear to all participants for collaboration to work well.

Clarity on goals, scope and context. Participants must begin a collaborative process with reasonable expectations about what the process can achieve, and what it is aiming to do. All participants should also understand the broader context of sustainable development, as a guiding principle for identifying solutions that integrate economic, environmental and social concerns.

Clarity on roles and responsibilities. Participants must understand each other's capacities to act and their responsibilities. Mistaken expectations about what each participant can bring to the table is likely to cause mistrust.

Clarity on timelines. Indeterminate discussions are frustrating. If there is uncertainty about how long the process will take, participants will seek venues outside the collaborative process to meet their goals, undermining the collaborative venture.

Clarity on rules. Participants must be clear about the rules governing the process. Are deliberations confidential? Must participants commit to sharing knowledge and information that is of common interest to the group? Is it acceptable to speak on behalf of the collaborative group? Without clarity on questions like these, there will be misunderstandings and disagreements, which undermine trust and prevent progress.

In summary, clear terms of reference are necessary— indeed critical—for any collaborative venture. The process must be designed in a way that ensures everyone will have a meaningful voice in designing the strategy, plan, or policies. That way each stakeholder will feel confident his or her interests will be considered and addressed in the plan in a fair and reasonable way.

"There are many examples of multi-stakeholder processes, both good and bad—Canadians have been doing this for quite a while. However, we have not captured and leveraged the learnings from these processes and institutionalized them in a way that avoids repeating the mistakes. Being able to effectively design and execute on effective processes is a strategic imperative for the country."

"The process involves having all participants define what the process wants to achieve, set the rules together, and establish clear terms of reference that fit the process."

FINDING THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Collaborative initiatives involve many participants working together. Environmental groups, businesses, scientists, citizens, and governments can all make important contributions to the policy process. Disparate and diverse participants need to be brought together if we are to move forward effectively on sustainable development, and that takes leadership—in other words, someone to convene and support the dialogue.

The role of the convenor in a collaborative process is to "set the table" for a constructive dialogue. This means finding a way to frame the problem that is acceptable to all participants, establishing a neutral space where all participants feel comfortable, developing initial ground rules for the process, and convincing the right players to come to the table.

Traditionally, that role of convenor has been taken by governments as the main agents of environmental and sustainable development policy. But this need not be the case, and a perhaps surprising finding from our discussions is the idea that while leadership is crucial to successful collaborative initiatives, that leadership need not always come from governments. It may be that in some instances governments are less well-placed to lead collaborative governance initiatives than business or civil society groups. To outside stakeholders and citizens at large, government is often seen as an "interest" unto itself. Whether governments should take the role of convenor may also depend on the nature of the issue and the stage of maturity of the debate on the issue.

"Collaboration without a timeline is a recipe for disaster."

"The convener has to be seen as an absolutely honest broker."

"The cynicism that surrounds government as the convener of collaborative processes means automatically that it is going to be viewed with distrust. The way forward might be to stay with the principles of collaborative engagement but change the convenor.

On many sustainable development issues, governments are under considerable pressure and may feel they have little room to manoeuvre. Often the efforts of governments to establish collaborative processes are criticized as diversionary or delaying tactics and, as a result, even attempting to establish a collaborative process can be risky. Other groups—environmental, civil society, or policy groups—may have greater flexibility to create space for a collaborative process. Yet while government is not necessarily best-placed to act as convenor, it is also clear that governments are essential participants in developing and implementing collaborative governance solutions for sustainable development. Exactly what role governments play—and at what stage they should be engaged in collaborative initiatives—will depend on the particular issue at hand.

The first and perhaps most challenging task for the convenor is to bring the right people together to identify and implement solutions to shared problems. But who are those "right people"?

Legitimacy demands that the process be somewhat representative, and include at a minimum representation from environmental, economic, and social groups. If significant interests are sidelined, this will both erode the perception of legitimacy and reduce the chance that truly common solutions will be found. Ultimately, stable policy solutions for sustainable development will not be found if a collaborative process excludes legitimate interests as those interests will seek other forums to advance their concerns.

At the same time, it is impossible to achieve perfect representation, and attempting to include all relevant perspectives and interests can be unwieldy and stall progress. In some cases, it may be better to focus on convening the innovators and thought-leaders, those who will contribute their visions for how to integrate environmental, economic, and social concerns in a constructive and pragmatic way.

"Moving forward might require having a facilitator who is independent of government to bring interests together."

"From a process perspective, it is very important to have the right composition of interests and persons around the table as a way to legitimize the process and outcomes."

"Do you put emphasis on front-runners, or on the majority? Increasingly I believe you may need to sacrifice some measure of representativeness in favour of achieving progress."

BUILDING LEGITIMACY

For a collaborative initiative to be successful, it must be seen as a credible, real, and legitimate part of the resolution of an issue. There are two mutually reinforcing forms of legitimacy that a process must build.

First, a process must build legitimacy from the inside. This means that the accountabilities must be clear, the process must be transparent, the rules fair. Good process builds its own, internal legitimacy.

Second, a collaborative policy process must either start with, or gain, an external legitimacy from established democratic institutions. In short, Parliament or Cabinet must in some way endorse, accept, or support the process if it is to be a democratically legitimate form of governance. Sustainable development cannot simply be "outsourced" by society to a multi-stakeholder process, and collaborative arrangements cannot replace the ultimate accountabilities of Parliament, legislatures, and governments in upholding the public interest.

"There can be a very authentic and good process—but unless the hierarchy of government decision makers agree to follow through, the process is not legitimate."

Roxanna Benoit, Deputy Chief, Policy Coordination Office, Alberta Executive Council, presented the experience of Alberta in adopting a collaborative approach to land use planning.

Land use is a complex sustainable development issue. In Alberta, tourism, agriculture, oil sands development and environmental outcomes are all important objectives. Rapid population and economic growth in the province put increasing pressure on the land use system, sometimes creating conflicts between different users of the land.

In 2008, the Government of Alberta published a Land Use Framework, which set out a new approach to land use planning, recognizing that rapid population and economic growth in Alberta meant that 'sticking to the old rules will not produce the quality of life we have come to expect'. The framework was developed through a two and a half year engagement process, and will be implemented through engagement processes in seven regions. The guiding principles of the framework demand that land use planning should be sustainable as well as collaborative and transparent. The framework is based on the understanding that long-term land use planning decisions need to represent the interests of relevant stakeholders and the need to work to agreed-upon economic, environmental and social outcomes.

To implement the framework, Cabinet will establish Regional Advisory Councils (RAC) for each of seven regions of the province. Each council will include members from government, the forestry and oil and gas sectors, First Nations, agriculture, municipalities, and environmental groups, however each member is asked to attend as an Albertan, rather than as a representative of their organization. Guided by clear terms of reference that Cabinet has endorsed, the RAC's job is to draft recommendations for a regional plan. Each draft plan will go through additional consultation, before it is brought back to Cabinet. This is an engagement process, with members of the RAC working together to identify land use strategies that are broadly acceptable in the region and consistent with provincial policy. The RAC is supported in its work by a Land Use Secretariat, which provides analysis, information and facilitation. The planning process is complete when a recommended land use plan is provided to Cabinet. Cabinet will assess the plan in the context of provincial strategy and retains the ability to reject or amend the advice, in exercising its overall authority over land use planning.

LESSONS LEARNED: The process is still in the early stages, with RACs established for two regions: the Lower Athabasca and South Saskatchewan. These are the regions with the most acute issues: rapid resource development in the Lower Athabasca, and water issues and urbanization in the South Saskatchewan. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is the presence of these land use pressures that has facilitated getting people around the table, because everyone can agree that the issues are pressing and need to be resolved. Development of the Lower Athabasca plan, in particular, has been a learning process as government works with stakeholders to identify cumulative regional outcomes. While there is strong desire to complete a draft plan, the complexity of the issues, the number of interests, and the challenge of integrating economic, environmental and social outcomes have required some additional time to build understanding, trust and confidence – taking the time needed to get it right.

BRINGING CITIZENS INTO THE PROCESS

Collaborative processes on local community issues can and do successfully engage citizens in action-oriented initiatives, but typically collaborative ventures involve people as stakeholders rather than as citizens—as representatives of particular interests, industries, or communities—who are empowered to act on their behalf.

However, understanding the needs, wants, and perspectives of Canadians is critical to making progress on sustainable development. Progress on transformational issues like climate change is not a matter of sweet-talking voters into accepting higher gas prices or switching off lights—it means establishing a broad social consensus and sense of shared purpose that will carry governments, political parties, and economic and environmental interests over time. While lots of collaborative processes will not directly include citizens as partners alongside stakeholder groups, there is an important role for citizen engagement mechanisms as part of a collaborative governance agenda.

At the same time, citizens are increasingly able to mobilize quickly around issues in ways that take governments by surprise. This includes action that side-steps governments, and directly tackles businesses and corporations to get results. *"There is a movement underway to direct public democracy... people will use the technological tools available to them to avoid government and force action upon who they perceive the players to be."* Concepts like "wiki-government," in which dispersed networks of active citizens contribute to policy making and implementation, are gaining currency. In this new context, in which social media tools enable new forms of community engagement to emerge, it is increasingly important for governments to engage citizens directly.

"I think the forestry sector is a good example. Rather than speaking about the forest industry, those involved learned to talk about the forestry "sector," which includes all the processes. The best lessons I learned were the importance of integrating the environment, social, and economic considerations, and defining a common vision. Everyone has a part to play, from the person on the skidder who helps to protect the forest, to the retailer who has a sustainable buying policy, to the consumer who buys certified products."

Once again, our discussions highlighted the importance of effective process. *"The process creates the public,"* noted a participant. In other words, polls can appear to create a public that is capricious, demanding, and distrustful; deeper engagement processes like citizen panels create a view of the public that is considered, thoughtful, and willing to take on responsibility. Inviting people to participate in real processes that they feel will have an influence, and doing so in a way that enables them to learn, consider, and debate different perspectives enables much more substantive and useful input from citizens. If we get it right, direct deliberative forums for citizen engagement can be an important complement to our existing democratic institutions. Parliament is formally charged with representing the voices of citizens in the way in which Canada is governed—but MPs and ministers are limited in their capacity to understand, explore, and represent the public interest. As both leaders and representatives, they occupy a difficult double role, and processes that directly and richly engage citizens on key sustainable development issues can be an important pillar of democratic governance.

"Capacity is an issue. Collaboration requires a lot of capacity to meet, engage, measure, and show outcomes. Most people have 14 things on their desks but only time to do 10. The ability and the resources to do this are challenging."

CASE STUDY 4. THE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE: ENGAGING CITIZENS ON HEALTH PRIORITIES IN THE MISSISSAUGA HALTON HEALTH REGION

Peter MacLeod, Principal and Founder of MASS LBP, *presented a case study of citizen engagement on setting health priorities.*

Local Health Integration Networks were established in Ontario in 2005, and part of their mandate is to engage the residents and health service providers in their communities. To get the best advice possible, the Mississauga Halton Local Health Integration Network decided to go beyond traditional ways of engaging with the community. After consultations with community leaders and health service providers, the network established a Citizens' Reference Panel on Local Health Priorities.

The Citizens' Reference Panel was created from a representative group of 36 citizens, chosen at random. They met for two full days, learned about health care issues in the region, talked to one another in a series of focused discussions, and reached consensus about some important health care priorities. In the end, it gave the Local Health Integration Network its ideas and recommendations to help shape the new Integrated Health Service Plan. This provided the Network with real, useful advice that was representative of the community that the Network serves.

LESSONS LEARNED: When they are engaged in the right way, citizens are willing, able, and ready to serve in helping make public policy decisions. Given the right opportunity, the public is not the capricious and demanding entity that opinion polls often seem to reflect. The public we see at work on citizen reference panels is thoughtful, considered, and responsible—exactly the virtues that are needed when making difficult public policy decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE
CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION

Progress on sustainable development in Canada requires establishing and building a culture of collaboration and engagement not just across government, but also more broadly across the public policy community. To do this, we need to adapt our governance mechanisms—the culture, the structures, the institutions—to enable and empower stakeholders, citizens, and communities to deepen their roles in governance, and to implicate them in a shared responsibility alongside government.

This is not easy. Collaborative processes can be costly and time-consuming. Alongside those that are successful, there will always be collaborations that fall apart and initiatives that disappoint. In our discussions, we identified some examples of processes that did not work as well as planned, often because of differing expectations or poor designs. We need to learn from these past experiences and improve the way we design, run, and manage collaborative processes.

Collaboration can also be risky for governments. In particular, emotive issues like climate change and water—which affect all levels of government and cross jurisdictions—can become caught up in highly politicized public discourse, with every move of government under intense scrutiny from stakeholders on all sides. Politicians are increasingly expected to come up with instant fixes when a problem surges to the top of the public and media agenda. Initiating collaborative or consultative processes is sometimes attacked as an abdication of responsibility on an issue, even when quite the opposite is true. Part of the answer is to ensure that stakeholders engaged in the collaborative process are willing and able to stand up in defence of the process as a real, legitimate contribution to sustainable development policy. At the same time, there is always a risk that stakeholders are not willing to take on responsibility. *"Many people want to be in charge, but few want to be accountable,"* was how one participant put it. The key is ensuring that stakeholders see the collaborative process as the vehicle through which they can achieve at least some of their own objectives.

Finally, we must also acknowledge and understand the limits to collaborative governance. Lengthy consultation and engagement processes can be convenient methods of sidestepping debate on an issue or postponing action. Collaboration and engagement can be entirely cosmetic, designed only to meet the desire of citizens and stakeholders to have their voices heard, with no intention of changing or implementing policies that result. These political tactics should be acknowledged, particularly as they can be seen as a response to the deeply politicized and highly charged nature of many sustainable development issues in Canada today. Truly collaborative initiatives reduce the encouragement of such behaviour, because they can help to lift an issue above the fray of day-to-day debate.

"The broader engagement process is expensive, but it tends to engage the broader, wanting-to-learn public. A more traditional process brings out the 'usual suspects with an axe to grind' who will never be happy."

"In the end, government is always accountable."

04

Making Collaboration Work: The Elements of Successful Collaborative Governance for Sustainable Development

Our discussions identified the elements of successful collaboration. Here, we draw on the preceding discussion to set out a framework for successful collaborative governance for sustainable development. These eight elements combine to build legitimacy from the outset and ensure the success of the collaboration.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL
COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Focus on clear outcomes

Collaborative processes must be focused on clear, measurable outcomes. Collaboration for collaboration's sake leads nowhere. Citizens will commit to a process that is expected to yield clear, real results.

01

Find the right convenor

Collaborative processes need a convenor that is credible, neutral, and trustworthy. The convenor must be able to bring the right players to the table and establish a process that will enable progress. Governments are often best placed to convene, but not always; sometimes others are better positioned to convene collaborative processes.

02

Bring the right people together

Collaborative processes must have the right players at the table. The process does not have to include every possible relevant stakeholder, but the process will not generate solutions that are successful in the long term if it excludes key interests.

03

Ensure real commitment

Every participant must commit fully to the collaborative process. This means a commitment from all participants to see the process through, to act on the results, and to find solutions together through the collaborative process.

04

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL
COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE
FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Create clear rules and scope
Collaboration depends on clearly defined and agreed upon goals, rules, and scope. Success requires clarity on the goals; it requires clarity on timelines, so that discussions are not open-ended; it requires clarity on roles and responsibilities, so that participants understand what is expected of them; and it requires clarity on the rules of the process, so that participants can police each others' actions and avoid conflict.

05

Foster shared ownership and accountability
Collaborative processes must develop a shared ownership and accountability for the process and the resulting policy solutions. Collaboration means that the participants are taking responsibility as a group for solving their problems together.

06

Build legitimacy
Collaborative initiatives must be—and must be seen as being—legitimate processes. Success depends on developing two forms of legitimacy. Internal legitimacy derives from having the right participants and good processes with clear, transparent, and fair rules. External legitimacy is gained through some level of recognition and backing from established democratic institutions.

07

Establish ongoing dialogue
Collaborative processes should establish ongoing dialogue and engagement. Ongoing processes create trust and build on past success. They enable evaluation and continuous learning from the successes and shortcomings of the past.

08

05

Looking Ahead: Concluding Thoughts on Collaborative Governance for Sustainable Development

In Canada today, sustainable development issues too often fall victim to adversarial and confrontational debate. Where there should be constructive ways forward, only mudslinging and distrust can be found. To move forward on the defining governance challenges of our time—biodiversity, climate change, clean energy, water management—all levels of government in Canada need to adopt a more collaborative approach to public policy.

Two decades ago, a phrase like "collaborative governance" got little play in mainstream Canadian public policy discussions. Some dismissed it as too idealistic; others thought it conflicted with our tradition of parliamentary democracy; still others feared it was a radical—even subversive—notion. It is a mark of how much and how quickly things are changing that a group as diverse as ours was not only willing to seriously entertain the idea, but also for the most part to treat the need for more collaboration as a given. Those of us who planned the project were surprised by the willingness of the group to champion collaborative approaches.

Why this change in outlook? Views vary. Some are spurred by the sense of urgency around climate change. Others worry about the polarized state of much public debate and are searching for ways to re-engage the players. Still others think new forces such as globalization and Internet technologies have made our society more interconnected—"networked"—and as a result are more willing to experiment with new processes and organizational forms.

But if the arguments differ, they converge on a similar conclusion: Canadians need to experiment more with collaborative processes if progress is to be made on sustainable development. Collaboration is no longer viewed as an idealistic but impractical idea—it is seen as a real and necessary part of the mechanics of governance.

Moreover, the willingness of several participants in our group to argue that organizations like the NRTEE and PPF should sometimes take the lead on such processes pushes this a step further. In this view, not only should stakeholders be more involved in defining and implementing solutions, sometimes they should also—rather than governments—convene and lead the processes.

This is a real change from the thinking of only two decades ago. In those days, the idea that governments would even consider sitting at the table as one stakeholder among others—albeit a critical one—would have seemed naive and impractical. Now it seems more plausible that others can foster collaborative processes that work with government, rather than simply wait for governments to take the lead.

We treat this idea seriously, if cautiously. Like others, we are still feeling our way in this shifting environment. But as issues become more complex, positions more polarized and entrenched, and governments more defensive and cautious, perhaps it is time to try a different approach. Perhaps organizations like the NRTEE and PPF not only have an opportunity to convene collaborative processes, maybe they have a responsibility to do so.

The PPF is forging ahead here, both in its efforts to explore and study collaborative processes and to work with governments and stakeholders to test new ideas. Its ongoing work in the field spans a wide range of areas, from sustainable development to healthy communities.

The NRTEE is perhaps in a unique position with respect to these issues. Given its legislated mandate to work on issues at the nexus of the economy and the environment, and its status as a quasi-government organization, it can play a role in navigating these waters by convening collaborative processes around sustainable development issues.

This report marks a beginning, rather than the end, of our two organizations' work on collaborative governance for sustainable development. Weaving collaboration and engagement into the fabric of public policy will take time, but we believe it is necessary if Canadians are to achieve that optimistic vision of ecological, social and economic prosperity going hand in hand. We invite not only the participants from our project to join us as we move down this path, but also our other colleagues from across the public policy community, in governments, in business, in academia, in groups like our own. Working together, we can build a sustainable Canada.

06

Appendices

ROUNDTABLE SESSIONS

Roundtable 1 – October 6, 2009, Ottawa, Ontario
Roundtable 2 – November 10, 2009, Ottawa, Ontario

PARTICIPANTS

Note: As the roundtable sessions took place in the fall of 2009, some participants' titles and organizations might have changed.

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NATIONAL ROUND TABLE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE ECONOMY: ABOUT US

Emerging from the famous Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future,* the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE or Round Table) has become a model for convening diverse and competing interests around one table to create consensus ideas and viable suggestions for sustainable development.

The NRTEE focuses on sustaining Canada's prosperity without borrowing resources from future generations or compromising their ability to live securely.

The NRTEE is in the unique position of being an independent policy advisory agency that advises the federal government on sustainable development solutions. We raise awareness among Canadians and their governments about the challenges of sustainable development. We advocate for positive change. We strive to promote credible and impartial policy solutions that are in the best interest of all Canadians based on research, stakeholder engagement, and consideration by Round Table members.

We accomplish that mission by fostering sound, well-researched reports on priority issues and by offering advice to governments on how best to reconcile and integrate the often divergent challenges of economic prosperity and environmental conservation.

The NRTEE brings together a group of distinguished sustainability leaders active in businesses, universities, environmentalism, labour, public policy, and community life from across Canada. Our members are appointed by the federal government for a mandate of up to three years. They meet in a round table format that offers a safe haven for discussion and encourages the unfettered exchange of ideas leading to consensus. This is how we reconcile positions that have traditionally been at odds.

We also reach out to expert organizations, industries, and individuals to assist us in conducting our work on behalf of Canadians. These partners help spark our creativity, challenge our thinking, and generate the momentum needed for success.

The *NRTEE Act* underlines the independent nature of the Round Table and its work. The NRTEE reports, at this time, to the Government of Canada and Parliament through the Minister of the Environment.

The NRTEE maintains a secretariat, which commissions and analyzes the research required by its members in their work. The secretariat furnishes research, administrative, promotional, and communications support for NRTEE activities and operations.

National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy | Table ronde nationale sur l'environnement et l'économie

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PUBLIC POLICY FORUM: ABOUT US

Building Better Government

The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization aimed at improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal and provincial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

Established in 1987, the Forum has earned a reputation as a trusted, non-partisan facilitator, capable of bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in productive dialogue. Its research program provides a neutral base to inform collective decision making. By promoting information sharing and greater links between governments and other sectors, the Forum helps ensure public policy in this country is dynamic, coordinated and responsive to future challenges and opportunities.

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