

# Exploring the emergence of a shared conception of sustainability within collaborative natural resource governance institutions

*“Something more than virtue is necessary in the realm of circumstance and power”*  
(Selznick, 1949, p. 266)

## Keywords:

System-level sustainability, social-ecological systems, institutional theory, collaborative governance, longitudinal qualitative research

## Introduction

Collaborative governance institutions have been widely implemented as a way to ensure institutional change towards more sustainable natural resource management, especially in water management (e.g. the Water Framework Directive (WFD) in the European Union). Nonetheless, the collaborative governance literature does not regard participation as a panacea anymore, notably in environmental management (Reed, 2008). Consensus can lead to suboptimal decisions from an environmental perspective, as collaborative agreements “often represent a compromise between competing interests rather than a collective search for ecologically optimal solutions” (Newig and Fritsch 2009, p.205).

Therefore, collaborative governance does not seem to always lead to sustainable natural resource management: the conditions and processes for that causal relationship to apply need to be clarified (e.g. Koontz & Thomas, 2006; Scott, 2015). On the other hand, the conceptions of sustainability vary widely, among both scholars and practitioners (Bansal & Song, 2017; DesJardins, 2016; Lankoski, 2016). We argue that different conceptions of sustainability may lead to vastly different environmental policy decisions and therefore different ecological outcomes. From an institutional perspective, it has been argued that “addressing topics like “ecologically sustainable organizations” requires first understanding how consensus is built around the meaning of “sustainability”” (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995, p.1016). Also, the emergence of a common language or of a shared understanding of the challenges at stake is advanced as a necessary first step towards successful collaboration (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Fan & Zietsma, 2017).

Our research design thus aims at answering the following research question: How does a shared conception of sustainability emerge among stakeholders of collaborative natural resource governance institutions? We aim to do so by pursuing a longitudinal qualitative study of the French river basin committees, examining how different stakeholders conceptualize sustainability and how those differences unfold in deliberations through time. We will consider in our analysis power dynamics as a determinant factor (Selznick, 1949; Hardy & Phillips, 1998). We will also try get a deeper understanding of the roots of those different conceptions of environmental sustainability, by analyzing how stakeholders relate to the social-ecological system (SES) they are embedded in, as an experienced place (Guthey, Whiteman, & Elmes, 2014).

## Intended contributions

This paper will hopefully help conceptualize better the relationship between collaborative governance and sustainable natural resource management, by underlining some of the terms and conditions under which the alleged causal relationship takes place. From an institutional perspective, it can help us understand institutional changes in terms of natural resource management at the level of an organizational field (Hoffman, 1999). Further, from a sustainability perspective, this study will shed light on “how stable or changeable are

conceptions of sustainability over time, and if change does occur, what are its causes?” (Lankoski, 2016, p.855). Finally, it could feed into the debate on the effectiveness of collaborative governance in environmental management and identify better the consequences of consensus from a sustainability perspective (Newig & Fritsch, 2009).

### Advancement stage

This paper is still in development. Data collection has been initiated but not completed and the conceptual framework is still in progress. Data analysis is at a very early stage. So far, the data collected includes 28 semi-structured interviews, field observations and the collection of the archives minutes of 2 river basin committees in France (Loire-Bretagne and Seine-Normandie), covering a period of 50 years since their inception in the 1960's.

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