

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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# Collaboration as a policy instrument in public administration: Evidence from forest policy and governance

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## Abstract

In recent decades, collaboration has become a common policy instrument in public administration, both internationally and in Sweden. Inspired by scholarly literature on collaborative governance, the aim of this study is to analyze the crucial role of public administration in the design and implementation of collaborative governance. Drawing on several years of research on Swedish forest policy and governance, our work is based on extensive empirical material, including 88 semi-structured interviews, observations, written comments from open public consultations and actors, enacted policy documents, open public hearings and a survey. Our results confirm that factors related to process design strongly affect the outputs and outcomes of collaboration in public administration. We assert that public officials should meticulously design and adapt the collaborative process during its initiation and progress, according to the policy problem and actors' incentives and motivations to participate. However, despite good intentions by public officials, the overarching priorities and contextual factors governing the policy area must be set by elected decision makers at an early stage to establish democratic accountability and high levels of policy legitimacy and acceptance. A major implication for public administration is that the increasing use of collaborative governance may be highly inefficient if it is difficult for participants to draft shared objectives and provide intended outputs because of low levels of trust, and different interpretations of knowledge and norms. Finally, in contentious policy areas, such as forest policy, political priorities must sometimes be set by elected decision makers rather than through collaborative processes.

## KEYWORDS

collaborative governance, policy instrument, public administration, qualitative methods, Swedish Forest Agency

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the use of collaborative processes in public administration has become increasingly common, not least in natural resource management, following implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Aarhus Convention and other international

agreements or programs such as Agenda 2030 (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bodin, 2017; Douglas et al., 2020; Johansson et al., 2020; Koontz et al., 2020; Mårald et al., 2017; Newig et al., 2018). [Correction added on 8 March 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, Koontz et al., 2019 was corrected to Koontz et al., 2020 in this version.] Collaborative governance can be broadly understood as

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“processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose” (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015a, p. 18). Hence, collaborative governance is often established to address complex issues by identifying common problems, sharing knowledge and information, and reaching common ground on outputs in the form of policies, management plans, and actions on the ground.

In collaborative governance, public officials are expected to play key roles, primarily by initiating and creating conditions for an inclusive and fair process (Björstig & Sandström, 2017; Zachrisson et al., 2018). Moreover, they require a new type of expertise and resources to establish effective collaborative processes (Cinque et al., 2022). This is due to the need to facilitate solutions to public problems, provide sufficient resources, and ensure not only that diverse actors are represented and engaged, but also that the process conforms to democratic norms of justice, representativeness and accountability (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Public officials must also be prepared to and have the mandate to implement and handle the outputs and outcomes of collaborative processes (Johansson et al., 2018).

Collaborative processes and governance can be severely compromised by power imbalances, both between central government and public administration, and between various actor groups (Brisbois & de Loë, 2016; Kallis et al., 2009). Hence, ample research has addressed the initiation of collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012), and public administration's important role in mitigating power imbalances (Björstig & Sandström, 2017; Cinque et al., 2022; Purdy, 2012; Zachrisson et al., 2018), but mostly in single case studies. Little effort has been made to accumulate knowledge and acquire a deeper understanding of the potential merits and challenges associated with governing through collaboration, particularly in contentious policy areas (cf. Douglas et al., 2020; Söderberg et al., 2021), and the key role played by public administration in such cases.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to analyze the crucial role of public administration in the design and implementation of collaborative governance. Drawing on several years of research on Swedish forest policy and governance, we devote particular attention to the extent public administration use collaborative governance as a strategic policy instrument to alter management practices in the forest sector. We also identify under which circumstances collaborative governance is a suitable policy instrument to reach intended outcomes, drawing primarily on participating actors' incentives and motivations to collaborate. For that aim, we explore the roles of public administration in three main stages of collaboration distilled by Eckerberg and Björstig (2022): initiation and design; facilitation; and finally handling of the outputs and outcomes of collaborative processes. In doing so, we focus on four collaborative processes within the same governance and administrative context—the forest sector in Sweden. The following research questions will be addressed:

**RQ1.** Given the identified problems to solve and/or handle—how did public administration initiate and design the collaborative process?

**RQ2.** What role did public administration play in the facilitation of the process?

**RQ3.** Did the collaboration result in intended outputs and outcomes, and did public administration have capacity and resources available to support action towards implementation?

The article has four sections following this introduction. The next outlines theoretical considerations related to collaboration. Section 3 describes the methods and sources used; Section 4 presents the results of the comparative analysis of four collaborative processes. The Section 5 discusses lessons from the Swedish case studies and wider implications for the use of collaborative governance as a policy instrument.

## 2 | COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AS A POLICY INSTRUMENT

We assume that collaborative processes are used as policy instruments through which the government and public administration generate, develop, evaluate, and implement policy objectives (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Using key factors identified by previous research (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015a; Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015), we analyze how public administration uses collaborative processes and its role in the three conceptual stages of collaborative governance (Eckerberg & Björstig, 2022).

### 2.1 | Initiation and design

Three factors are crucial when analyzing the initiation and design of a collaborative governance process: the type of problem addressed (structured or not), the objective of the process (a means to an end or an end in itself), and public administration's selection of actors and target groups (based on actors' incentives and motivations to participate).

Structured policy problems (Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015), require minimal collaboration, since they are associated with a relatively high degree of agreement about relevant norms, principles, goals, means, and knowledge required to solve them. Thus, there is minimal need to initiate collaborative processes to address them. If focal problems are moderately structured there will be some agreement on associated norms, principles, goals, means and/or knowledge required to address them. However, they may entail different degrees of collaboration due to variation in the level of trust among involved actors. In these cases, the active involvement of public administration in the initiation of collaboration may be necessary, but once the process has been designed the role may be much more passive since the actors may build mutual trust and understanding through their engagement (Emerson et al., 2012). Finally, unstructured problems are characterized by uncertainty in terms of both norms and knowledge. Hence,



the degree of uncertainty, and possible competing solutions among actors, must be considered to understand the potential to reach a shared understanding of what can be achieved (cf. Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). With these types of problems, public administration may need to play a much more active role not only in the initiation of the process but also as facilitators and mediators if conflicts arise or persist (Purdy, 2012; Zachrisson et al., 2018). As a first step in the analysis of public administration's role in collaborative governance, it is thus necessary to identify the type of problem involved. This can be done by focusing on the level of agreement regarding norms and knowledge as well as the level of trust among involved actors (Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015).

The second essential factor is to identify the main objective for using collaboration (cf. Buchy & Hoverman, 2000), for example, to build trust, increase legitimacy, strengthen participant capacity, generate transparency, co-produce new knowledge, foster adaptive learning, facilitate multifunctionality/sustainability, and/or promote efficient implementation. These objectives are not mutually exclusive but indicate different strategic purposes and/or goals based on the context of the problem they are intended to address (Innes & Booher, 1999). Following previous literature, we assume that the overall objective will guide the design of a process and consequently the third factor—selection of actors and target groups. In this respect, the actors' incentives and motivations to collaborate must be considered when initiating and designing a collaborative process (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015a). Actors' expectations regarding the likelihood of the collaborative processes yielding meaningful results, particularly relative to the time and energy commitments, must be addressed by public administration. The actors must believe they will gain more from collaborating than they will lose from not collaborating. Further, actors tend to avoid participation when they perceive their concerns are already sufficiently represented or they anticipate manipulation by more powerful actors (Focht & Trachtenberg, 2005). Public administration should try to mitigate potential explicit or implicit power imbalances between actors in the initiation phase of collaboration. For example, environmental and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often depend on volunteers and tend to have less resources at their disposal than commercial actors, and by securing funds for their participation public administration can level the playing field before a collaborative process has commenced (cf. Weber & Christophersen, 2002).

## 2.2 | The collaborative process

Since we focus particularly on processes initiated top-down, it is essential to analyze public administration's management of the processes, including the rules and mandates, available resources and communication. Previous literature highlights a need for a structured approach with clear process management (i.e., leadership continues to be important). Professional facilitation or mediation (by public administration, or an external facilitator if there are low levels of trust towards the agency) may be crucial (Zachrisson et al., 2018). In

addition, clear ground rules and mandates for the involved actors will provide process transparency, avoid raising exaggerated expectations, and motivate the actors to participate and persevere during the process (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Furthermore, the involved actors' capacities to engage in active, committed dialog are widely assumed to depend on the available resources, within both the organizations they represent and the public agency responsible for the collaborative process. Thus, public administration continues to play a crucial role in ensuring equal participation for all actors involved (Purdy, 2012) and can ameliorate effects of inequality (i.e., power dynamics) by providing funding and resources, and ensuring that the process conforms to democratic norms of justice, representativeness, and accountability (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

Since consensus-building, or finding common ground on key issues, is the most intense and time-consuming phase of a collaborative process (Margerum & Robinson, 2016), it is important to assess the role of communication, both internally in the participating organizations, and between public administration, involved actors and the public (Buchy & Hoverman, 2000; Jager et al., 2020).

## 2.3 | Outputs and outcomes

There is increasing research interest in and efforts to evaluate the performance, productivity or effectiveness of collaborative governance arrangements (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015b; Lee & Hung, 2022; Robinson et al., 2020) but analyzing and assessing the quality of particular outcomes of a collaborative process is challenging. Emerson and Nabatchi (2015a) advocate an assessment by analysis of “intermediate” outputs (actions) and end outputs, intermediate or end outcomes (impacts), and adaptation (responses to outcomes). However, the collaborative process may involve the dissemination and creation of knowledge that changes beliefs, fosters dialog and discussion, builds trust, and increases legitimacy (Scott & Thomas, 2017). Thus, these are both intermediate outcomes and causal mechanisms through which public participation and collaborative processes can improve policy outcomes.

Outputs, or the concrete actions in terms of, for instance, a plan or program that emerges from collaboration, are easier to capture than outcomes (Koontz & Thomas, 2012). Thus, it is important to examine if the initially stated goal(s) have been achieved and/or altered during the process and, perhaps more importantly, if involved actors (including public administration) have implemented outputs from the collaboration. This is closely linked to the collaboration's perceived legitimacy, not least the internal legitimacy of the process, which is essential for avoiding high risks of actors refusing to accept the output and/or responsibility for implementing it, thereby impairing possibilities of long-term adaptation (Mosley & Wong, 2021). More recently, scholars have also critically examined the use of collaboration and when it can or cannot be used as a policy instrument to achieve long-term, sustainable goals (e.g., Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015; Jager et al., 2020; Koontz et al., 2020; Rogers & Weber, 2010). If collaboration fails to deliver expected outcomes, latent conflicts may be

**TABLE 1** Key factors guiding the analysis and comparison of collaborative forest processes.

	Stages		
	Initiation and design	Collaborative process	Output and outcome
Key factors	Type of problem	Process management	Goal achievement
	Objective	Ground rules and mandates	Implementation
	Selection of actors and target groups	Resources	Legitimacy
		Communication	

inflamed, with further escalation to alienation and distrust among involved actors (Reed et al., 2018).

In summary, we have found 10 key factors that can explain the role of public administration in collaborative governance, and why collaborative processes sometimes succeed, and sometimes fail to achieve their initial objectives or lead to unintended consequences. These factors, summarized in Table 1, have guided our analysis of how public administration (specifically the Swedish Forest Agency, hereinafter the SFA) used collaboration as a policy instrument in the four focal forest-related collaborative processes.

### 3 | MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | The Swedish context and studied collaborations

In an international perspective, Swedish public administration has a large degree of discretion in their authority assignments, which means that public officials have a great responsibility to interpret their tasks, to act objectively and impartially and be aware of potential conflicts of interest that may arise in practice (Cinque et al., 2022). This is also the case for the SFA, that is the national authority in charge of forest-related issues. SFA's main function is to promote a management of Sweden's forests that enables the objectives of forest policy to be attained. The forest policy places equal emphasis on two main objectives: production goals and environmental goals (Appelstrand, 2012). Each year the SFA receives direction from the government with goals and the financial framework for the organization. We argue that the Swedish context is highly relevant since collaboration fits well into current forestry policy, which explicitly affirms the importance of “freedom with responsibility,” granting all Swedish forest owners substantial influence on how the two main goals of Swedish forest policy are balanced (Johansson et al., 2020; Wallin, 2017). This is consistent with important elements of Swedish forest policy from 1993, including abandonment of detailed regulation and economic incentives in favor of soft regulation, such as provision of information and advice, extension services and voluntary agreements (Appelstrand, 2012; Schlyter et al., 2009). In addition, the constitutionally guaranteed principle of “dualism,” intended to ensure the semi-autonomy of public administration in relation to the government (Eklund, 2008; Jacobsson & Sundström, 2007) provides a relevant case for exploring the discretion of public administration,

**TABLE 2** Collaborative forest processes and materials.

Collaborative process	Duration	Material for documentation
The Swedish National Dialogue for Nature Consideration in Forestry (Mancheva, 2021)	2011–2019	Document analysis, 38 semi-structured interviews and one observation
Sweden's first National Forest Program (Johansson, 2016, 2018; and previously unpublished materials)	2014–2018 (parts of the program are still ongoing)	22 semi-structured interviews, participant observations, comments from an open referral round addressed to a large group of actors, records of public hearings and enacted policy documents
Collaborative process focused on improving the management of Swedish forests in the young forest phase (Johansson et al., 2018)	2015–2016	14 semi-structured interviews, records/minutes from seven dialog meetings
Collaborative process on woodland key habitats (Bjärstig et al., 2019)	2017–2019	Ongoing learning evaluation, based on 10 observations/field notes, 14 semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and an evaluative survey conducted by the Swedish Forest Agency

that is, the SFA. In combination, this principle and the shift “from government to governance” has greatly increased the scope of collaborative measures in the development of policy as well as management measures in public administration (Cinque et al., 2022). Accordingly, this context enables us to study the roles of public officials and their use of collaboration in settings where they have a relatively high degree of independence from democratically elected decision-makers, and thus power and freedom to design and



maintain collaborative processes, that is, providing a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

We chose to compare collaborative processes in only one country and a single sector, since public administration has varying governance styles across countries and sectors (Candel et al., 2020) and focusing on one can limit the contextual variables that influence the processes and choice of collaborative design. Thus, focusing on the forest sector in Sweden can improve the possibilities to advance and clarify collaborative governance theory, specifically in terms of public administration's use of, and role in, specific stages of collaborative governance by studying factors that explain variations in cases without complications from contextual factors (Nowell & Albrecht, 2018). We have studied four collaborative forest processes in depth, summarized in Table 2: the Swedish National Dialogue for Nature Consideration in Forestry (NCF), Sweden's first National Forest Program (NFP), a collaborative process focused on improving the management of Swedish forests in the young forest phase (YFP), and a collaborative process on woodland key habitats (WKH).

The National Dialogue for Nature Consideration in Forestry (NCF) was initiated by the SFA in 2011 to address long-standing tensions with commercial forestry organizations regarding how consideration of environmental values in forestry should be implemented and subsequently evaluated by the SFA. Including representatives of state agencies, commercial forestry and NGOs, it was intended to reach consensus on reasonable levels of consideration of environmental, cultural and recreational values. The outputs consisted of legally non-binding Strategic Objectives and information brochures with short texts and visualizations explaining how to perform various forest management practices. The Strategic Objectives were intended to guide future forestry measures and thus required further implementation by forestry organizations in educational and planning materials to make an impact. Moreover, the Strategic Objectives are perceived as tools open to revisions as new knowledge is accumulated, rather than as final guidelines (Mancheva, 2021).

Since the 1990s National Forest Programs (NFPs) have been adopted in more than 100 countries to provide permanent national forums for joint deliberation on forest policy by the state, private companies and NGOs. In Sweden, the government decided to initiate a formal process to adopt an NFP as part of efforts to meet National Environmental Quality Objectives in 2014. The NFP was established with a secretariat based at the former Ministry of Rural Affairs, and a board consisting of approximately 20 representatives from interest groups, NGOs, public agencies and companies. The program board was intended to act as an advisory body to the government and provide guidance for the collaborative process. Between 2015 and 2016 collaborative working groups consisting of diverse interests were established to provide recommendations in the policy process (Johansson, 2016, 2018). The first NFP process resulted in a strategy and action plan for sustainable forestry in which public authorities have the responsibility for coordination and action, as well as the establishment of regional forest programs.

The dialog on forest management in the young forest phase (YFP) was part of an initiative by the SFAs to promote adaptive forest

management that started in 2013. The overall aim was to create conditions that enhance both biomass production and the environmental status of Swedish forests. The SFA's interpretation of its role in adaptive management focused on developing knowledge about sustainable forest management at the interface between science and practice. After an initial phase of process development, a recruited panel agreed to initiate a collaborative process to improve the management of young forests across Sweden. An important aim was to test an adaptive model of forest management, which included a structured decision process during 2015 and 2016. The process involved representatives of diverse interest groups, forestry companies (large- and small-scale), energy providers, and others involved in tourism and outdoor activities (Johansson et al., 2018). The output of the process was specific management strategies and decision options for young forest management across Sweden.

In 2017 the SFA initiated a collaborative process on woodland key habitats (WKHs), including various forest actors with the purpose to develop WKH inventory methodology and improve its application. The concept was launched in Sweden in 1990 to help forest owners understand the biodiversity value of their forest, and the SFA conducted nationwide inventories between 1993–1998 and 2001–2006 to map, delimit, and register Swedish WKHs. The resulting inventories provided foundations for setting aside forests for conservation and formally protecting forest land, for which forest owners receive monetary compensation from the government. However, the methods for mapping, delimiting, and registering WKHs were strongly debated, mainly due to regional differences (particularly difficulties in using the current method in north-western Sweden). Accordingly, the SFA initiated a collaborative process intended to strengthen consensus regarding use of the WKH concept as an important component of the Swedish forest conservation strategy (Bjärstig et al., 2019). The WKH working groups produced proposals in several memos that provided foundations for a framework concerning new ways to apply the WKH concept.

### 3.2 | Empirical material and analysis

The comparative analysis in this study is based on extensive empirical material, including 88 semi-structured interviews (see Appendix S1 in Supplementary material), 18 field studies/observations, records of public hearings, enacted policy documents and an evaluative survey conducted by the SFA and shared with us as part of an ongoing evaluation (see Table 2 for details on the empirical material).

All interviews were conducted during the period 2016–2019 and similar research methods were applied for gathering the empirical material. The original studies, displayed in Table 2, were all rooted in collaborative governance theory, enabling their inclusion in the analysis as suggested by the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007). All interviews were conducted by the first three authors. Complementary material, such as various forms of observations, written documentation and policy documents, were



mainly used to enable qualitative rigor through triangulation and validation (Nowell & Albrecht, 2018).

Our analytical procedure can be described as empirically based theorizations in a deductive manner as we interactively considered the key factors presented in Table 1 and specific observations in the studied processes (cf. Nowell & Albrecht, 2018). We then systematically compiled the material from the four processes, first individually and then collectively in an excel sheet to get an overview. Based on that we identified similarities and differences as well as possible explanations for them, with a particular focus on the key factors in Table 1. The material is presented on an aggregated level since we wanted to compare overall features of the collaborations rather than specific details. However, for transparency, significant quotes relating to the key factors are provided as examples in Appendix S2 in Supplementary material.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Initiation and design

Three of the collaborative processes were initiated by the SFA and one (NFP) by the Government Offices with the aim of improving forest policy and/or management. The policy problems addressed range from structured (YFP), through moderately structured (NCF and WKH), to unstructured (NFP) in terms of agreement and/or uncertainty regarding relevant norms, principles, goals, and means, as well knowledge required to solve the problems (cf. Hurlbert & Gupta, 2015).

Regarding the objective of the studied collaborative processes, three focused, at least initially, mainly on issues related to forest management on the ground. The NCF was initiated by the SFA to resolve its disagreements with commercial forestry organizations regarding how environmental and cultural considerations should be applied in forest practices and how the considerations should be evaluated. The outputs were expected to be applicable in forestry practices and set mutual evaluation norms. Similarly, a key goal of the YFP collaboration was to increase the variation in the management of forests in the young forest phase. According to the SFA, the main objective of the process was to develop variants of silvicultural programs for even-aged forest management that could help landowners meet different land use objectives. Further, such variants were expected to be developed through adaptive management with a focus on learning through dialog, and at the interface between science and practice. Similar to the NCF, an important objective for the YFP was to generate useful results for forest owners to apply in their production forests. The WKH collaboration was also practically oriented, with the objective to develop WKH inventory methodology and clarify its application.<sup>1</sup> The SFA perceived a need for this collaborative process because WKH

definitions had changed over the years, and both the concept and its application had been debated. However, the WKH process proved to be much more complex and dependent on political priorities, as we will show.

The NFP collaborative process, in contrast, had a more overarching objective: to find common ground and formulate appropriate policies to develop “sustainable forestry” that contributes to a robust bio-based economy. A key goal was to enhance open dialog with actors relevant to forests and associated value chains, including economic, social and environmental values. From the government's perspective, the primary reasons for establishing it was to ensure that forest uses were adapted to climate change and reduce use of fossil fuels. Thus, a far-reaching consensus on the desirable development and priorities of forest policy was to be pursued through collaboration. Accordingly, it was seen from the start as addressing a more unstructured policy problem than the other processes.

Common for most of the studied processes (NCF, NFP, and WKH) was the substantial degree of uncertainty concerning several issues related to forest management, for example, sustainable levels of harvesting and alternative management regimes, such as non-clear-cut forestry (also known as continuous cover forestry or close-to-nature forestry). The degree of uncertainty in the YFP process was lower since the management of forests in the young phase, as undertaken today, is not one of the most controversial issues in Swedish forestry. In addition, there is substantial knowledge of the negative effects that forestry can have on water resources and biodiversity. However, there is significantly less knowledge and agreement among involved actors regarding *how* and *what* should be done to mitigate those effects.

The level of trust among the involved actors in the collaborative forest processes varied. Initially, the NCF process was impaired by conflict between commercial forestry organizations and the SFA. Trust was gradually established during the process (and enhanced by parallel collaborative processes involving these actors). In addition, the NFP process was characterized by low trust among key actors, mainly due to competing pathways of knowledge production, for example, on biodiversity conservation, forest production and the role of forests in mitigating climate change. There were low levels of trust between private landowners and public administration, especially due to a lack of clarity and funding of high conservation value forests. There were also ongoing conflicts of interests between various non-state actors, for example, environmental NGOs and large-scale forest companies.

In the YFP, the results show that a structured step-by-step process (clarifying the decision context, identifying objectives and measures, developing alternative solutions, estimating and evaluating consequences and trade-offs, and deciding how to proceed), the involvement of expertise, and guidance by an independent facilitator fostered trust both among the actors and between them and the SFA. The initiation of the WKH process was based on a previous fruitful collaboration and started with a positive atmosphere, imbued with mutual respect and trust. However, the general willingness of actors to engage was severely undermined when environmental NGOs and scientists decided to drop out of the collaboration. This resulted in

<sup>1</sup>The proportion of forests with a high nature conservation value is claimed to be 4–10 times higher in north-western Sweden than in other parts. Furthermore, the SFA concluded that the method for identifying WKHs was insufficient for forests in north-western Sweden due to delimitation difficulties.



decreased levels of trust among the actors involved, not least towards the government. First, the government increased the budget and instructed the SFA to make a national inventory of WKHs, then the newly elected government withdrew the instruction to undertake WKH inventories—indicating that the administration is semi-autonomous in relation to the government in theory, but in reality, severely constrained through governmental directives and budgetary allocations.

An important factor that relates to the initiation of collaborative processes is the public administration's responsibility for selecting and inviting actors and target groups. The SFA used their traditional channels to find relevant participants for the NCF process and issued a broad invitation to actors, allowing the inclusion of all interested in participating. However, the actors' actual capacity to participate was important, as described in the next section. In the NFP there was a broad invitation to actors to participate in the process, at different points in time, including four thematic working groups with representatives of diverse public agencies, commercial actors and NGOs. The actors generally recognized the importance of participating in open hearings and working groups, partly due to the direct contact with the Government Offices and the Minister of Rural Affairs. In contrast, in the YFP collaboration there was a working group consisting of 11 actors with different perspectives. Unlike the NFP process, the actors participating in the YFP did not regard participation as a key priority. In the WHK collaboration, the “usual suspects” were invited, and environmental NGOs criticized the decision to include only a few of the environmental NGOs that actively work with forest management issues and exclude those associated with reindeer husbandry (a customary practice by the indigenous Sami). Later, the environmental NGOs and scientists dropped out of the collaboration. The collaboration thus consisted of actors representing the forest sector, specifically, forestry companies and organizations, public agencies and one certification organization (however, the environmental NGOs subsequently re-joined the process).

In addition to being invited, it is essential that the participating actors have the incentives and motivations to collaborate. In the NCF process there was no financial compensation available up to 2018 for participating in meetings and events, potentially excluding actors with limited financial resources to participate in the process. Most of the environmental NGOs dropped out at an early stage from the working groups (but a few remained). In addition, while the forest sector had incentives to participate, or at least nothing to lose since the NCF's outputs would be advisory, the environmental NGOs saw their participation in the process as a way for the forest sector to legitimize the outputs. In the NFP, there was some financial compensation for participating in meetings and events. However, all actors, including those with limited resources, generally prioritized the NFP process and declined to participate in others at the same time.

All interviewed actors in the NFP expressed a strong willingness to participate and devote considerable time to various meetings and activities. Since the process was initiated by the Government Offices, they saw high incentives to participate and possibilities to influence policy development. This indicates that government-initiated

processes were prioritized more highly than those initiated by the SFA (such as the YFP). Some actors did not regard collaborative processes as part of their daily work, and when they had to prioritize, the meetings in YFP came second. Hence, it was difficult for the SFA to obtain broad participation of all the relevant actors with committed engagement and dedication of sufficient time and effort. In the WKH process, participation was prioritized by most actors. However, the environmental NGOs involved would have welcomed the invitation of additional environmental NGOs and Sami representatives. They could not contribute to all the working groups and had to choose where and when to participate, indicating that the capacity to participate varied between involved actors. When the environmental NGOs dropped out, they instead used media channels to communicate their views. Involved scientists also dropped out since they regarded the composition of actors in the collaboration as too biased and in favor of the forest sector. The actors who continued to engage in the WKH process did it to “protect” their own interests.

## 4.2 | The collaborative process

As already stated, when a collaborative process is initiated, it is important for public administration to be involved and enable participating actors to reach common understandings of the objectives, mandates, and expectations of the process. Thus, there was a need for clear process management by, and leadership from, the SFA in three of the studied processes, and from the Government Offices as well as the SFA in the NFP process. In the NCF process, leadership proved to be crucial. The SFA not only coordinated the process and brought different actors together, but also ensured that there was a balance between interests, and that all had an equal say in the discussions and decision-making. This also applied in the NFP process, where leadership was essential, but not primarily by the SFA. The working groups were led by independent external facilitators and two of the participating actors (representing either an NGO, commercial actor or public agency). All interviewees argued that the combination of facilitators with different backgrounds was a strength that added legitimacy and credibility to the process. Representatives from the Government Offices and SFA participated as observers and answered potential questions about the timeframe and mandate of the process. The “rolled-back” role of public administration was considered suitable given the high level of conflict among actors. Similarly, the YFP process was considered well organized partly due to the deployment of a skilled external facilitator, who provided guidance that was described as essential. In the WKH process, leadership from the SFA was generally perceived as ambitious and strong. The responsible SFA official was described as clear, distinct, and a good communicator who facilitated and coordinated the process in a structured manner, despite an overall lack of political steering, disruptions and delays (as further discussed in the next section).

Closely linked to process management is a need for clear ground rules and mandates. In three of the four collaborative processes (NCF, NFP, and YFP) most of the interviewed actors regarded the

collaboration as well organized. In the NCF process, all interviewees also stated that there were clear rules and mandates, as well as transparent decision-making. However, in the NFP process the mandate of the working groups was considered unclear from the outset, not least regarding how the outputs and recommendations would be handled by politicians, including the Swedish government and parliament. The mandate of the working groups was also considered unclear from the outset in the YFP process, especially how the outputs and actors' recommendations would be handled by the SFA's counseling services for private forest owners. In addition, the scope of the process (management of young forests) was considered narrow, but acceptable for the specified objectives. Finally, in the WKH process all interviewed participants stated that the SFA and official in charge of the process had been very clear when communicating their mandates as well as the rules and format of the process, so they felt that they understood what was expected from them. However, the collaborative WKH process was disrupted several times due to contextual changes. It was initiated in February 2017, and the first major disruption occurred in the following month, when the SFA temporarily paused the registration of new WKHs in north-western Sweden. This decision was communicated via media by the SFA's director-general and surprised most of the involved actors, including SFA officials. It disrupted the newly established collaboration by affecting trust, the core objectives of the process and the participants, as it prompted the environmental NGOs and scientists to drop out of the process. The next disruption occurred during the government's budgeting in the fall of 2017, when the SFA was commissioned to provide a large nationwide inventory of WKHs for the coming decade. Since the government did not provide formal instructions until 9 months later (May 2018), the collaborative process was put on hold during that period. In line with the new formal instructions, additional organizations were invited to participate in the collaborative process and the environmental NGOs that had left the process in 2017 decided to return. Collectively, these changes substantially altered the overall status and mandate of the collaboration.

The resources available for the four collaborations differed somewhat. The SFA had a budget for coordinating the NCF process, but participating actors had to finance their own participation. However, resources were subsequently provided to cover their travel and similar costs. The Ministry had a budget for coordinating the NFP process, but participating actors had to finance their own participation (with associated capacity effects). Similarly, the SFA had a budget for coordinating the YFP and WKH processes, but participating actors had to finance their own participation. In addition, government funding for WKH inventories came and went.

Closely linked to resources are the equal terms of participation of involved actors. In the NCF process some actors perceived an overrepresentation of the forest sector (specifically commercial forestry), and corresponding bias in the discussions and outputs (as discussed below). Some actors also perceived overrepresentation of commercial forestry in the NFP process, but several stressed that in the working groups participation was more balanced than in previous processes and that other actors, in addition to the "usual suspects," were invited

to collaborate. In the YFP process, the SFA had problems in both recruiting actors and engaging them all in broad participatory collaboration. Generally, they represented a small, but diverse, group of actors. Participation and the power relations in the WKH process were clearly affected by several actors' decision to leave the collaboration. This severely weakened the representativeness, and consequently the perceived legitimacy of the process but did not surprise other actors, since environmental NGOs had acted in a similar way in other processes (e.g., NCF).

Communication is also a critical factor to be addressed by the public administration, and in the NCF process there was reportedly open internal communication, which was balanced by the SFA representative and the process leader. There was a perceived overrepresentation of forestry views, but all external feedback on the output during the referral process was taken into consideration and addressed, potentially balancing out that perceived bias. In the NFP process communication was often considered unclear by most of the actors, especially concerning the timeframe and mandate, in contrast to the YFP process, where the communication was considered good, mainly due to the independent facilitator. The WKH process actors also regarded the responsible officer at SFA as a good communicator and felt that everyone was allowed to express their views in the working groups' discussions.

### 4.3 | Outputs and outcomes

We now turn to the results of the collaborative processes to examine what they yielded, starting with the goal achievement. The NCF process achieved the goals of lowering the conflict level and yielding outputs in the form of Strategic Objectives that have been implemented to a high degree in the forest sector. However, these outputs are less well accepted by environmental NGOs, some of whom do not perceive them as having the potential to improve forest water protection and forestry practices. It is unclear whether the outputs will lead to improved outcomes, despite wide implementation. The low levels of consideration before the outputs, and their broad implementation, could lead to some improvements, but the Strategic Objectives may not lead to significant positive environmental outcomes due to the forest sector's overrepresentation and lack of scientific knowledge regarding some of the practices. Moreover, such outcomes will be impossible to evaluate since the evaluation methods were changed after the outputs were decided. In the NFP, the working groups presented four thematic reports in 2016 in accordance with their initial themes. Two years later, in 2018, the Swedish government adopted the first National Forest Program with four major targets: sustainable forest management with greater climate benefits; multiple uses of forest resources to provide more jobs and foster sustainable growth throughout the country; world-class innovation and processed forest products; and finally sustainable use and conservation of forests to maintain Sweden's high profile in international cooperation. To deliver these very broad targets it includes an action plan targeting activities mainly within the state's responsibility. At least initially, the NFP





collaboration reached the goal of providing a forum for joint deliberation and capacity-building to address complex, conflict-ridden issues pertaining to current land use. However, as described below, the utility of the outputs still remains unclear.

To set goals in the YFP process, groups of actors brainstormed possible land use objectives and operational practices for tending young, even-aged forest stands. They developed eight management options, but the actors held differing views regarding the options' novelty and to what extent they would contribute to a more varied forest landscape. Nevertheless, the process yielded specific management strategies and measures in line with the initial objective. The WKH process also yielded recommendations and proposals by working groups as initially planned, but the participants were not confident that the objectives would be implemented. Most of the actors interviewed merely expressed hopes that they would, or that the process would at least be a step in the right direction, and a few stated that they did not think that the process would be fruitful.

The implementation of outputs of the collaborative processes has varied considerably. Outputs of the NCF process are very widely used and implemented in internal policies and other guiding tools by the forest sector. It is also claimed by some of the interviewed actors that the process has positively affected other policy instruments, such as market-based certification schemes. In contrast, the extent that outputs of the NFP process have resulted in new management options or practices is not clear, or even how progress and goal-achievement should be measured. The outputs reveal a strong discrepancy between high initial expectations of key actors (a new forest policy framework), suggestions provided by the four working groups, and the final program endorsed by the government in 2018. The final program did not provide clear suggestions for achieving multiple, incompatible management goals in practice, best incentives for landowners beyond compliance with environmental regulations, or effective, innovative policy instruments for governing a transition towards a bio-based, low-carbon economy, as many actors had initially hoped. Several positive results of the YFP process were identified by most of the interviewed actors, including genuine discussion with consideration of different interests and values. However, most of the actors were unsure about how the decision options for forest management in the young forest phase that came out from the collaboration, would be made practically relevant and accessible to landowners, and whether they would produce any changes on the ground. Finally, results of the WKH process remained unclear for a long time. Short-term outputs including better inventory methodology and reports from the working groups were delivered, but since WKH inventories were halted the new methodology had little use and no long-term impact. Although the outcome of the WKH collaborative process was initially considered good and accepted by participants, the anticipated effects contributed to the actors strategically stalling its implementation, while waiting for the politicians to reach decisions. Finally, the SFA decided in late 2021 to remove previously registered WKHs from the register and not add new ones.

The implementation of the outputs can be linked to the collaborative processes' perceived legitimacy and acceptance of their results. In

the NCF process participants representing the forest sector perceived the process as legitimate and the outputs were widely accepted by implementing actors. However, the Strategic Objectives have very limited ambitions (the stakes for implementing them are not high). Contrary to collaborative processes focused on reaching consensus on overarching policy, the NCF process had limited focus on specific management strategies and measures, lowering the stakes for participants. Actors advocating nature protection perceived bias in some aspects of the process (and the WKH collaboration) due to the forest sector's overrepresentation. Since the perception of legitimacy by non-commercial forestry actors was nuanced, the process appeared to have high legitimacy within the forest sector and lower legitimacy for non-commercial actors.

In the NFP process, political bargaining severely delayed the program's adoption, which caused a lack of perceived internal legitimacy for key non-state actors. However, the dialogs' organization was considered balanced, and the legitimacy of the process was, at least initially, generally considered to be high. The YFP process was perceived to have high legitimacy, partly due to the application of a structured decision-making model. The actors represented diverse interests and outcomes of the process were determined in an open atmosphere, in alignment with objectives known from the start. As previously described, the decision of environmental NGOs to leave the WKH process severely weakened the representativeness, and hence the perceived legitimacy, of the process initially. Besides the initial drop-out of environmental NGOs and scientists, the government's handling (budget allocations, new instructions, etc.) affected the perceived overall legitimacy, highlighting the difficulty of collaborative policy development, especially when it is highly politicized since it affects the actors' expectations of the process and its end results. The WKH collaboration also faced other challenges, such as negative media attention, political discussions, and pressure from the parallel process of renewing the Swedish FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification standard. For a summary of the main features of each process see Appendix S3 in Supplementary material.

## 5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As previous research has shown, it is difficult to conduct collaborative processes and even more difficult to achieve combinations of both forestry and nature conservation goals (cf. Borg & Paloniemi, 2012; Primmer et al., 2014; Sarkki & Heikkinen, 2015; Zachrisson & Lindahl, 2013) and public administration plays a crucial role in mitigating these difficulties (Zachrisson et al., 2018). In the collaborative process addressing a structured problem (YFP) with overall agreement regarding the knowledge base, public administration experienced difficulties already in the initiating and design stage when it came to recruiting actors to the process. This disinterest was not alleviated even by a structured step-by-step process and guidance from an independent facilitator. Our results thus indicate that collaborative governance should not be seen as a default policy tool. Specifically, in issues where the same outcome in terms of specific management

strategies and measures would be possible to reach by more traditional approaches (e.g., through consultations or hearings) it can be a waste of time and resources (cf. Newig et al., 2018; Zachrisson et al., 2018).

On the contrary, when addressing a moderately structured problem (NCF and WKH) focusing on agreement regarding knowledge, public administration's use of collaborative processes as policy instruments proved more valuable. The aims of both processes were achieved to some degree (to a lower degree in the WKH), although at the expense of perceived external legitimacy, since the actors engaged mainly came from the forest sector, due to the drop-out of environmental NGOs. Public administration was forced to handle this disruption of the power relations among the engaged actors, and successfully so, according to participants. However, in the case where the disagreement concerned norms rather than knowledge (the WKH), and public administration was forced to fill positions with members of its own staff, the perceived legitimacy was further weakened. The disagreement on norms complicated public administration's use of collaborative governance since the mandate of the process did not allow a modification of goals to resolve conflicts or the prioritization of values and objectives. The framework of the process was also altered several times by changes imposed by the government. Ultimately this resulted in a collapse of the process and failure to reach the intended outcomes. Despite that collapse, the partial attainment of the process' goals indicates that collaborative governance can be fruitfully used in this type of moderately structured problems.

The collaborative process handling an unstructured problem (NFP) was strongly rated in terms of participation and dialog. However, the government's capacity to prioritize and follow through the myriads of suggestions by the working groups was limited by party politics and current mandates in the Swedish parliament, where the governing parties were not in a majority. Our results thus illustrate that no matter how good collaboration and facilitation by public administration is perceived to be, it faces similar challenges to other collaborative processes since public administration's discretion is limited due to political constraints, even within the Swedish context of dualism (cf. Eklund, 2008; Jacobsson & Sundström, 2007).

For collaborative processes to contribute to the achievement of politically determined goals, there is a strong need for political stability and long-term commitment. These ingredients were not present in the collaborative process that collapsed and resulted in failure (WKH). Thus, if collaborative processes are to be proactive, effective generic policy instruments and elements of governance strategy (cf. Imperial, 2005), they should be carefully applied in public administration, rather than used as a routine policy instrument when it is not necessary, justified or feasible. Our results indicate that when several collaborative processes run in parallel, actors tend to prioritize those that seem to fit their needs better, leading to difficulties in the maintenance of others. Public administration must thus reflect on the type of policy problem addressed as well as what actors and target groups to invite, and be prepared to engage actively in all stages of the process, including its outcomes. Collaborative processes do not automatically lead to consensus among actors or increases in problem-solving

capacity (cf. Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015a). Hence there is a need to assess *if* and *when* collaborative governance is justified and helpful to reach an intended outcome. Public officials have important roles to play in designing and facilitating the processes, with due consideration of both the objectives and involved actors' collaborative capacities, and later in implementing outcomes (Cinque et al., 2022; Zachrisson et al., 2018). However, our results indicate that collaborative processes that are organized by, and offer the possibility of direct contact with, democratically elected decision-makers, are prioritized more highly by actors than those facilitated by public administration. This indicates that actors may be more inclined to attempt to change political priorities, and thereby influence what political goals are prioritized, than to invest time and effort in changing specific management practices.

This study provides insights that have deepened our understanding of the role of public administration in collaborative governance. Swedish forest policy and the debate surrounding it are increasingly characterized by a high degree of conflict, while collaboration is increasing in scope as a policy instrument (Bjärstig et al., 2019). The four collaborative processes we analyzed and compared, are only a few examples of collaborations initiated by public administration in Sweden, and others are either finished, ongoing or will be initiated by the SFA or the government in the near future. However, political ideology and the parties in government set the direction of Swedish forest policy, public administration's mandates, and hence the contextual framework for collaborative processes. Among many other factors, the prioritization of competing goals, for example, nature conservation (public) versus property rights (private), depends on election results (Bjärstig et al., 2019). Since collaborative processes are time-consuming and resource-demanding for both public administration and other actors involved, collaborative governance as a policy instrument must be used with care and not in a standardized manner. This is especially true when there are few possibilities to reconcile different perspectives and priorities and enhance outcomes on the ground. This implies that collaborative approaches are often more suitable for addressing action-oriented or organizational issues related to forestry (as in the NCF and YFP cases) than for addressing highly politicized issues and/or policy development (as in the WKH or NFP process). The NFP case also shows that actors prioritize collaborative processes with the potential to change political priorities/set the political agenda. Our results thus indicate that the principle of "dualism" and public agencies' semi-autonomy in relation to the government (cf. Eklund, 2008; Jacobsson & Sundström, 2007), can be challenged in cases where there is a possibility to influence political priorities and alter norms. Accordingly, collaborative governance is not always a suitable policy instrument for public administration to use, especially when there is clear disagreement regarding the norms that set the foundation of policymaking and that can only be resolved by political decisions.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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