9 Collaboration opportunities and challenges – trend or necessity?

Claus Hedegaard Sørensen

Collaboration – nobody can oppose that. This is a common viewpoint. Society is complex, and we are facing major challenges – not least in terms of climate and other planetary boundaries. And these are problems that cannot be handled by individual stakeholders in isolation. That is why collaboration is necessary. This is not least the case for public transport, where a multitude of stakeholders, both public and private, are involved and have to work together in order to achieve good results. It also means that voices critical of collaboration are rarely heard within public transport. When criticism arises, it mostly relates to the fact that the parties focus too little on collaboration – that they do not make enough efforts when collaborating, or that they lack the necessary skills to conduct collaboration properly.

At the same time, anyone who has worked in a public or private organisation for a few years knows that organisational trends and fashions change. First, there is one way of organising that is the right one, with which all organisations and employees have to comply, and soon another way of organising is appropriate [1] [2]. These kinds of fashions also characterise public transport, and they characterise research in the field of public transport. This chapter asserts that collaboration is a good example of this.

The chapter looks at how focus on collaboration in Swedish (and international) public transport has changed over time, and how research has changed as well. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications for public transport stakeholders today.

What is collaboration?

What exactly is collaboration, and how does it differ from other terms such as cooperation or coordination?

There is little consensus on this issue among researchers, and they often emphasise different aspects of collaboration. Some focus on collaboration being formal, consensus-oriented and deliberative processes [3]. Others emphasise that collaboration is all about working together on tasks that the parties cannot complete as effectively on their own, and that they therefore work together in order to achieve specific, concrete results, even if they do not necessarily have the same goals [4]. Still others have focused instead on the fact that collaboration is something more than coordination, and that collaboration is characterised by a higher degree of complexity and long-term interaction between multiple parties [5].

Collaboration can be formalised and legally binding to varying degrees. Thus, collaboration can be based on a contract between parties: between RPTAs and public transport operators, for example. It can also be based on more informal partnerships where cooperation is not legally binding; and finally, it can involve the development of mutual understanding and the formulation of a common understanding of problems [4].

Collaboration in public transport is particularly interesting: firstly, because strengthening public transport is crucial for achieving sustainability and climate goals in the transport sector; secondly, because public transport in many countries is often governed by a public body but involves many other public and private stakeholders; and thirdly, because significant academic literature on collaboration has emerged in recent years [3]. But historically, how did the need for and focus on collaboration in public transport arise?

Unbundling and corporatisation

A series of public sector reforms took place, particularly in Europe, from the 1980s onwards. These reforms were inspired by Margaret Thatcher's rise to power as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and were often implemented with reference to the economic difficulties in the public sector. The reforms were launched under the banner of *New Public Management (NPM*) and included breaking down public organisations into smaller units, often organised as companies and sometimes privatised. Competition for delivering products and

services came to dominate, and targets, performance measurement and management practices inspired by the private sector were introduced. A key argument was that the changes would make the roles of individual organisations simpler and clearer, promote efficiency and thus reduce costs [6].

Bus wars in the United Kingdom

While the kind of competition introduced in Sweden was off-road competition (that is, competition for contracts via procurement procedures), things were different in the United Kingdom (outside the London area):

'In the early days after deregulation there were a number of instances of aggressive on-the-road competition between operators providing services on the same routes. In some instances, this involved provision of excessive frequencies, continuous changes in schedules, with vehicles racing each other to pick up passengers at stops.'

NERA (2006) The decline in bus services in English PTE areas: the quest for a solution, p. 16

This type of reform became dominant, particularly in the field of public transport. Swedish public transport also saw this type of reform early on. As early as 1988, the organisation of Swedish railways was divided into two entities: one responsible for the tracks (Banverket) and the other for train operations (SJ), whereas SJ had previously been responsible for both. In local and regional public transport, the changes involved abolishing bus operators' monopoly on running specific routes. Instead, a commissioning system was established, with regional transport authorities acting as purchasers and bus operators running the services through procurement procedures. Transport planning by the transport authorities was thus separated from the actual work of running the services. This development strengthened coordination in public transport [3] [7]. These market-oriented changes in public transport were taking place throughout much of the world, generally enjoyed strong political support and were viewed as necessary and appropriate.

During that period, the issue of collaboration between public transport stakeholders largely remained unaddressed. The same was true of research, which focused more on the extent of market-oriented reforms implemented in different countries and the manner in which this was done [8] [9]. However, there were always sceptical voices, not least with regard to the radical implementation of market-oriented reforms that took place in the United Kingdom (outside London): the citation in the text box refers to this.

> A number of qualities are important for successful collaboration, including trust, openness, respect and inclusive dialogue. Collaboration is a learning process where progress is made one step at a time.

Collaboration emphasised

From the start of the new millennium in particular, there was greater emphasis on the negative consequences of the changes implemented. NPM-inspired reforms were not abandoned, but efforts were made in parallel with the introduction of market-oriented reforms to ensure greater governance, coordination and collaboration. Reforms with this focus have often been termed *post-NPM reforms*. Many other initiatives and concepts focusing on cooperation also emerged around this time, in both practice and research. These included public-private cooperation, co-production, collaborative innovation and meta-governance of networks. Also, greater emphasis on involving citizens in the development of public policy was stressed, and several of these concepts also included this.

Efforts to achieve collaboration also crept into public transport [10]. Collaboration is explicitly referred to early on in public transport legislation; in the Swedish Public Transport Act (SFS 2010:1065), for example, which came into force in 2012.

Any major investment in public transport requires collaboration involving several stakeholders. In local and regional public transport, in particular three relationships, gain attention, namely collaboration between:

5. The Regional Public Transport Authorities (RPTAs) on the one hand, and, on the other, bus and train operators, which sometimes form part of major international organisations. This often involves private ownership, but there are also examples of organisations that are wholly or partly owned by other states.
6. The municipality responsible for urban and road planning on the one hand, and, on the other, the RPTAs responsible for public transport planning.
7. Different authorities responsible for different modes of transport, such as public transport, cars, cycling, walking and shared modes of transport. This often involves authorities at different administrative levels, but it may also involve collaboration between departments within the same public authority.

The introduction of fast bus routes inspired by the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) concept increases the need for collaboration between municipalities and public transport authorities as roads often have to be rebuilt in order to accommodate bus priority and dedicated bus stops, often in the middle of the road. Similarly, the need for collaboration with other modes of transport has increased; and become

more complicated with the advent of several shared modes of transport, such as shared bicycles, shared electric scooters and shared electric cars.

Of course, there are many instances other than those referred to where collaboration is needed; such as the initiatives for introducing a national ticketing system in Sweden and the transition to electric buses. There was also an urgent need for collaboration when COVID-19 arrived in Sweden, with dramatic consequences on public transport passenger numbers and health risks for both passengers and drivers. Similarly, redevelopment of stations involving many stakeholders with particular interests is also a typical situation in which collaboration plays a major role.

So how has research addressed the issue of collaboration in public transport? 'Collaboration' was a topic of research right from the time K2 began, and K2 researchers have contributed significantly to the international literature. This is reflected, for example, in a new international *Handbook of Transportation and Public Policy* [11], in which three chapters focus on collaboration and coordination: two of these written by authors affiliated with K2.

What insights does K2 research into collaboration provide?

It points out – among other things – that collaboration can take different forms. It may be both formal and informal, and the parties may be more or less loosely interconnected. A number of qualities are important for successful collaboration, including trust, openness, respect and inclusive dialogue. Collaboration is a learning process where progress is made one step at a time.

TEN TIPS FOR BETTER COLLABORATION:

1. A shared vision is a basic prerequisite, as is a shared understanding of common benefits, trust, commitment to the process and gradual results.
2. Ensure that all organisations affected are involved early on and establish clear rules for collaboration between different organisations. It is also important to ensure that there is a clear political mandate. Without a clear mandate, there is a risk that processes driven through collaboration will have an unclear status.
3. Make sure that 'difficult issues' are brought to the table early. Clarify who will be paying for what, for instance. It is also necessary to understand the conditions in terms of perspectives, roles and mandates that characterise each organisation.
4. Every organisation needs clear internal goals and clarity regarding responsibilities between units and departments.
5. You and your organisation need to be willing to compromise and help create good conditions for communication and understanding.
6. Conflicts and tensions between different organisations' goals, approaches and ways of working are a natural part of collaboration.
7. Bear in mind that all organisations bring different things with them in terms of their form and history.
8. Trust grows slowly, so be patient!
9. Collaboration may require significant resources for an organisation and can also be challenging for the people who represent the organisations. Collaborative processes also need to handle the fact that conditions may change at times. Built-in flexibility and adaptability are required. And remember: it might sometimes be better not to collaborate at all.
10. Looking after the interests of your own organisation while also helping to bring about collaboration in good faith is a challenge.

K2 (2019): Så kan vi samverka bättre, Kollektivtrafikforskning på 5 minuter (our translation)

Some organisations and people are better than others at collaborating, and there are specific cultures that promote collaboration. One important purpose of collaboration is to build a common identity and mutual understanding. The need for a central stakeholder with specific responsibility for collaboration, known as a meta-governor, has also been studied recently. It is also important to understand that conflicts cannot be avoided, and therefore what can be gained from collaboration should not be overestimated. Collaboration takes place everywhere in public transport; but at K2, particular attention has been paid to collaboration in connection with the establishment of new stations, public transport-oriented planning (Transit Oriented Development), innovation in public transport, Mobility as a Service (MaaS), and the introduction of bus rapid transit.

So, there is a wealth of literature – much of it produced within the K2 environment – on how to collaborate effectively and fruitfully in public transport, what

conditions are appropriate and what can be achieved through collaboration. One example is an information sheet published by K2 six years ago, presenting 'Ten tips for better collaboration'. A K2 publication focusing on recommendations on smart mobility, where collaboration was also emphasised, is another example. This is achieved by means of a series of questions that public authorities at different levels should ask themselves (see text boxes).

GENUINE PROGRESS REQUIRES COLLABORATION

A K2 report from 2021 on the governance of smart mobility contains a number of questions that may serve as a checklist for decision-makers and officials wishing to prepare their organisations for development of smart mobility. The authors have this to say about collaboration:

In our municipality/region, have we paved the way for dialogue and collaboration between companies that want to develop and offer mobility services and municipal/regional/state interests linked to different geographical contexts?

Is our region helping to coordinate the efforts of different municipalities in respect of transport and mobility in ways that will lead to more sustainable and cost-effective solutions in respect of land use and parking policies, for example?

As a government agency, have we taken on the role of 'meta-governor' or 'coordinator' in ways that pave the way for collaboration between private and public stakeholders at different levels?

Hultén et al. (2021): Att styra det nya. Samhällets styrning av och med smart mobilitet. K2 Outreach 2021:1, page 12 (our translation).

Limits to collaboration?

In Sweden, collaboration in public transport appears to be a strong ideal. In itself, it constitutes a kind of ideology embedded in institutions, politics and the thinking surrounding public transport [3]. Expressing criticism is almost like swearing in church. Asking questions about the benefits of collaboration has been described as heresy [12].

However, critical voices have become louder over time, and there are now people within the public transport sector who are dubious about the time and energy that collaboration requires and refer to 'collaboration inferno', for example [13]. There are complaints about how slowly things progress when working in collaboration, and the overloading often experienced by individuals working with collaboration has been emphasised [3]. The more critical tone can also be observed in research; mainly in analyses of sectors other than public transport, but research has also

been conducted by researchers affiliated with K2 on the limits to collaboration in public transport. The research has questioned whether collaboration does actually assist in achieving the goals of public transport [14], and a typology of negative impacts has been created [3]. The typology includes negative democratic and negative organisational consequences, as well as negative consequences for problem solving:

Democratic consequences

Goal displacement involves focusing on the collaboration itself as a goal, rather than focusing on the actual problem to be resolved. As collaboration is a strong ideology, it can therefore obscure the actual issues relating to aspects such as delivering better service, creating customer satisfaction and attracting more passengers.

The cementing of power structures relates to the fact that some stakeholders have significantly better access to data, knowledge, time and money, thereby allowing them to achieve more influence than others through collaboration. This issue is applicable to virtually all areas of society, but inequality in influence may become more prominent and at the same time less visible, particularly in the case of collaboration that may be more informal in nature and where the parties bring their own resources to bear.

The weakening of representative democracy relates to the fact that some issues vanish from the political agenda as they are expected to be dealt with in collaboration between officials. Thus, collaboration in public transport may also contribute to depoliticisation of issues that essentially relate to different groups' opportunities to have their transport needs met, and hence the distribution of resources in society.

Organisational consequences

Increased bureaucracy is the consequence of a new organisational layer of collaboration that constitutes an additional administrative burden on top of the existing organisations. This results in the creation of more complex and opaque structures for workers to comply with and manage.

Overloading relates to individuals who are particularly competent when it comes to collaboration and may therefore easily become overloaded. Collaboration is often reliant on individuals who are good at the task and already have contacts and a network to fall back on.

Consequences for problem-solving

Innovation is inhibited by the need for many stakeholders to reach agreement, which can easily result in decisions being dominated by the lowest common denominator. Not all decisions and new solutions can be implemented using consensus and the lowest common denominator as the starting point when it comes to the transformation of the transport sector, for instance, where public transport has an important part to play.

Slowness comes about due to the fact that the many stakeholders make it difficult to agree on solutions, which delays decisions and planning. This situation is often highlighted by stakeholders involved in collaboration in the field of public transport. One example is a national ticketing system, which has been in development for over 30 years; while COVID-19 is an example of how quick decisions can also be made through collaboration.

And finally, there is *stalemate* due to the fact that collaboration requires at least two stakeholders. However, there may be situations in which one of the parties simply has no interest in cooperating but benefits from conflict and disagreement. Both political parties and interest groups are extensively fuelled by conflict and disagreement as this helps to highlight the need for them.

LIMITS TO COLLABORATION

It is important to be aware of the negative consequences of collaboration.

Criticising collaboration should not be regarded as heresy.

Public transport stakeholders should always consider, carefully and critically, the nature of the content, the institutional structure and the interests of the various parties before engaging in collaboration. 'Don't do it unless you have to', as it has been said.

Sørensen, C.H. & Pettersson-Löfstedt, F. (2025): "Limits to collaboration in public transport: a typology", which is a chapter in Anthony Perl, Rosalie Singerman Ray & Louise Reardon, L. (eds): Handbook of Transportation and Public Policy. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

So now what?

Society is facing an enormous transition if we are to avoid further exceeding of the planetary boundaries, including worsening of the climate. The transport sector in particular needs to be transformed. Going forward, we need to travel less, use far less polluting modes of transport when we do travel and carry on introducing cleaner technology. Some major changes have to be made, and many politicians,

officials, grassroots organisations and researchers are involved in deliberations on how best to create and promote transformation of the transport sector. There is no doubt that public transport has a key part to play if the sector is to undergo successful transformation.

The ideology of collaboration asserts that better, stronger collaboration represents a way forward. Collaboration involving many strong stakeholders can transcend silo thinking, identify the solutions we need and collectively help with implementing them. This is the way forward for both major societal challenges and other, minor issues in and around public transport.

However, the chapter also indicates that organisational trends and fashions in public transport and research are shifting. The emphasis in the 1980s and 1990s was on New Public Management and marketization of public transport, and there were few references to collaboration. There was greater emphasis on collaboration around the turn of the millennium. This wave impacted also on public transport and on research into collaboration at K2. Since then, questions about the potential of collaboration have increasingly been raised. Collaboration also has negative consequences, and there are limits to what it can contribute to and what problems it can resolve. Whether this critical view of collaboration will become a new wave is something that will only become apparent after a while. It is important to emphasise the fact that there are no watertight barriers between the different trends and fashions. Instead, they overlap and can be viewed as different ways of thinking and ideologies that are layered one on top of another.

However, the shifting view of collaboration provides public transport stakeholders with good reasons to be sceptical and ask critical questions about the current trends and fashions: Is marketization really the solution? Is collaboration really the solution? Does collaboration really have so many negative consequences? These are reasonable and necessary questions, and no one should be burned at the stake for asking them.

Collaboration is relevant and important in many contexts. However, there are limits to what collaboration is able to contribute. The contribution of collaboration is probably limited for the big and wicked problems which are caused by climate change and exceeding planetary boundaries, and which require radical transformation of the transport sector. The solution to these difficult problems is characterised by conflict and disagreement, and some people will have to give up the privileges they currently enjoy. If the aim is consensus and the lowest common denominator, collaboration can easily result in a stalemate that does not move us forward.

Often it is politicians who propose collaboration between officials, businesses and interest groups at different levels, probably due to the fact that politicians are also influenced by the ideology of collaboration. Another explanation could be that it is convenient. It is more convenient to let others come up with proposals rather than having to devise and propose unpopular solutions yourself as an elected representative. A certain degree of arm's length distance can be attractive to politicians. However, there is a major need for politicians at all levels to take on political leadership rather than asking others to resolve the problems.

In 2016, K2 published a report entitled 'Dömd till samverkan!' [Condemned to collaboration!]. [5]. The title can be understood in a number of ways. One interpretation could be that a public transport system with so many stakeholders makes collaboration inevitable. There is no other way (and this is probably the interpretation the author had in mind). Another interpretation could be that the ideology of collaboration is such a strong trend that no organisation or individual wanting to be taken seriously can disregard collaboration in respect of public transport. A third interpretation could be that collaboration is characterised by difficult and protracted processes with no visible results, in which case collaboration can be viewed as a harsh sentence to bear.

An attempt has been made in this chapter to illustrate how the perception of collaboration has changed, including in research. A critical and sceptical approach to collaboration and other new organisational trends and fashions appears to be a sensible way forward for both organisations and individuals operating in the public transport sector.