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CONSENSUS BUILDING: CLARIFICATIONS FOR THE CRITICS

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Abstract Many critiques of consensus building have been uninformed about the nature of this practice or the theory on which it was built, though there is extensive literature on both. It is grounded in the theory and practice of interest-based negotiation and mediation. It is not grounded in Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, though theorists have found useful illumination in his ideas. Claims are often made about pathologies of consensus building based on cases where the conditions for authentic dialogue recognized by both practitioners and theoreticians were not met. Documentation of cases shows that when these conditions are met, many desirable outcomes occur. The article examines the various critiques, including the claims that external power differentials are deterministic, that lowest common denominator solutions are the outcomes, that valuable tensions are lost in the process, and that agreements are fleeting at best. It shows how and why each of these is not borne out by experience. Consensus building is time consuming and requires skill and training. It is only appropriate in situations of uncertainty and controversy where all stakeholders have incentives to come to the table and mutual reciprocity in their interests.

Keywords authentic dialogue, collaboration, communicative rationality, consensus building, power

For years I have wondered whether to respond to the critics of communicative theory and consensus building. It seemed a futile exercise as so much of the criticism is, as Healey commented in a review of a recent collection of articles (Healey, 2003), confused and confusing. The criticisms of consensus building in particular have often involved assumptions and speculations about how it does or does not work, but show little evidence that the critics have consulted the extensive literature and empirical research on the topic. Few critics, moreover, appear to have done their own research on the subject. Their commentary sometimes conflates theory and practice, criticizing one when it is really the other they are referring to. It often conflates consensus building with the broader set of collaborative planning practices. It sometimes lumps together diverse communicative theorists, attributing what one says to all, as if communicative theory were a tight discipline instead of a loose cluster of scholars who read and reference each other's work but write about very different topics, only one of which is consensus building (Innes, 1995). It frequently fails to give references to articles, much less to page numbers, where those being criticized were supposed to have made their claims.

This article responds to these criticisms, some of which have been made as almost offhand comments in articles about other topics or as commentary at conferences, as well as, in some cases, in serious critical articles about communicative theory. Some of the comments have been made by those who are themselves communicative theorists. The purpose of this article is not to criticize my colleagues. Their comments, questions and challenges have helped me to see where those of us who study or do consensus building have not been clear enough in how we talk about it. The reactions have also helped me to see where the gaps are in the knowledge of those who comment. Therefore this article is designed to clarify what consensus building is and how it works, as well as how its theory is linked to other theory. Because this article is not about the critics, it does not refer for the most part to individual articles or critics. The criticisms and the way they are laid out should resonate for many readers, however, as they have been repeated often in many venues.

This article focuses on one part of the larger field of communicative planning theory – the theory and practice of consensus building – which has been a lightning rod for much of the criticism leveled at communicative theory. My own research and theorizing have focused on consensus building and collaborative policy dialogues for the last 12 years, and the scholarly literature on the topic has been growing rapidly in a number of fields. Consensus building has deep roots in practices and theories of interest-based bargaining, mediation and alternative dispute resolution, building on while transforming these for use in planning and policy making. Indeed, one can neither understand how consensus building works as a practical matter nor build theory about it without understanding this basic work (Fisher et al., 1991; Moore, 1987; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987). Theory about the

nature of collaboration is also essential (Gray, 1991; Healey, 1997), as is an understanding of the nature of dialogue, as differentiated from debate or ordinary discussion (Isaacs, 1999; Roberts, 1997, 2002; Yankelovich, 1991, 1999). Consensus building has been widely used, and its use has been documented in regulatory negotiation (Ozawa, 1991; Susskind and MacMahon, 1985; Ryan, 2001; Weber and Khademian, 1997), water resource management (Connick, 2003; Connick and Innes, 2003), health (Hughes et al., 1999; McKearnan and Field, 1999), habitat conservation (Thompson, 1997), growth management (Innes et al., 1994; Unknown, 2003),[1] affordable housing (Susskind and Podziba, 1999), fisheries management (Wilson, 1999), international relations and ethnic conflict (Saunders, 2001; Susskind et al., 2002), budgeting (Abers, 1998; Baiocchi, 2001), urban planning (Balducci, 1999; Balducci and Fareri, 1999), and many other arenas.

Many types of processes are referred to as consensus building in the literature. An author may present a failed process as evidence of the inadequacy of the theory of consensus building though the author tells us little, if anything, about what was actually done in practice, and may not explore the external conditions that may have caused the failure. However, not all consensus seeking activities are equal and not all should be labeled consensus building. In my view, which is shared with most practitioners and theorists of consensus building (Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution, 1997; Susskind et al., 1999), a number of conditions need to hold for a process to be labeled consensus building. If these do not hold, failure of various kinds is likely. These conditions are:

1. Inclusion of a full range of stakeholders;
2. A task that is meaningful to the participants and that has promise of having a timely impact;
3. Participants who set their own ground rules for behavior,[2] agenda setting, making decisions and many other topics;
4. A process that begins with mutual understanding of interests and avoids positional bargaining;[3]
5. A dialogue where all are heard and respected and equally able to participate;
6. A self-organizing process unconstrained by conveners in its time or content and which permits the status quo and all assumptions to be questioned;
7. Information that is accessible and fully shared among participants;
8. An understanding that 'consensus'[4] is only reached when all interests have been explored and every effort has been made to satisfy these concerns.[5]

Typically for groups of any significant size addressing a major and complex controversy a skilled and trained facilitator is needed to achieve these conditions. While the evidence is strong from practice that the first eight conditions are essential to successful outcomes, the evidence remains inconclusive about the type of facilitation that is needed. Some argue that a facilitator should be a professionally trained neutral while others contend that stakeholders or other members of a community can be effective if they have the skills and they can act neutral in their facilitation role. One study, for example, involving interviews with participants in 100 cases where a professional neutral assisted in the resolution of a land use dispute found that participants largely agreed that an unbiased mediator was highly important to resolution of conflict (Susskind et al., 2000). On the other hand, a study that surveyed participants in watershed collaborative processes found that facilitators and coordinators were useful to the achievement of agreement but not necessarily to the perceptions about the production of outcomes such as the building of social capital or impact on the watershed. While neutrality was perceived as the best role, in some cases stakeholders were regarded as effective facilitators (Leach and Sabatier, 2003). Some groups, especially at the community level, may not be comfortable with outside facilitation. Many may not have the resources for professional help, so these are reassuring findings for them. As the skills of facilitation are spreading, however, we will have the opportunity to address this question through further empirical study.

Research on consensus building has shown that when a process meeting these conditions is implemented, it can produce joint learning, intellectual, social, and political capital (Gruber, 1994), feasible actions, innovative problem solving, shared understanding of issues and other players, capacity to work together, skills in dialogue, shared heuristics for action (Booher and Innes, 2002; Connick and Innes, 2003; Unknown, 2003; Innes et al., 1994; Innes and Booher, 1999a, 2003; Ostrom, 1990).[6] It can include new ways for players to understand and reframe their identities in relation to a larger picture (Connick and Innes, 2003; Innes and Connick, 1999) and in a way contingent on others' identities. Second order effects such as spin-off partnerships and new ideas for use in other situations and new institutional forms of planning and action (Connick, 2003; Innes and Booher, 2003) are common, but not often clearly identified in assessments of these processes. Often critiques have shown what I regard as an excessive focus on whether agreements were reached or how long it took to reach them (Coglianese, 1997). Sometimes agreements are the least of the outcomes of successful processes (Innes and Booher, 1999a) because so many other things are accomplished. Many processes, moreover, are not designed to seek agreement in the first place, but rather, for example, to build understandings in a community or mobilize players.[7] Any agreement or plan can be fleeting or flawed, and consensus-based agreements are not immune from this problem. Agreements in consensus building processes may be more like

punctuation marks in an ongoing deliberative process than they are the final end product. Consensus building and collaboration of a variety of kinds can build societal and institutional capacity (Cars et al., 2002; Chaskin, 2001; Healey, 1997, 1998).

We have defined the model of consensus building described above, as authentic dialogue (Booher and Innes, 2002). This concept has much in common with Habermas' notion of communicative rationality, but it is far from identical. In particular, unlike communicative rationality, it is not primarily an epistemological view or ideal type process, but a practical view of what it takes to make robust choices about the future in a real world situation, taking into account diverse views and multiple knowledges and understandings. This view is informed, as I indicated earlier, by the basic principles of interest-based bargaining, but it is most of all informed by more than 20 years of consensus-building practice in a wide array of policy arenas. Practitioners and researchers have learned the importance of choosing an appropriate task and allowing participants to control their own processes. They have developed meeting management and facilitation techniques, ways of organizing large groups into smaller ones with different tasks that feed into a larger mission, ways of adapting to the changes in the political context and to the personal and ideological conflicts that are inevitable during a consensus building process, ways of working inside and outside the dialogue at the table to assure steady progress, ways of working when they do not know their goals, and many other practical tasks too detailed for this article. The practice experience is growing around the USA, with an ever-increasing number of practitioners skilled in the design and management of such processes and an ever-increasing number of stakeholders seeking a way out of impasses or looking for creative solutions to seemingly intractable issues.

To make a consensus building process work, skilled conveners start with a conflict assessment identifying the stakeholders and their interests. Stakeholders inevitably have differing amounts and types of power, but what is important is whether their BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) (Fisher et al., 1991: 97–106) is a good one or not. Players come to the table only because they know their interests are not being served well by going it alone. Even seemingly powerful players may be worried about uncertainty and delays or about proceeding without the legitimacy of wide support. A powerful player probably does not have a good BATNA or he/she would not be at the table. Conveners also try to make sure that everyone at the table at least potentially has interests that are in some way reciprocal with at least some of the others'. This is essential if stakeholders are to stay attached and committed to the process. That is, each player must have something to offer one or more other players at the table and others must be able to offer them something. Discovering this reciprocity is a central part of the dialogue. Reciprocity is something that is equally important for the more and the less powerful stakeholders.

Professionals who facilitate collaborative dialogues know that any process without a key stakeholder is likely to lack the necessary information to develop a feasible strategy and the legitimacy that is essential to implementing it. Many will not proceed with the dialogue if some group that has a substantial stake is not included. Facilitators and organizers of these processes sometimes go to substantial effort to identify and enlist organizations and groups such as nonprofit or advocacy organizations to mobilize or at least speak for marginalized or disadvantaged stakeholders. They sometimes raise funds to pay for their participation costs or for providing them with technical assistance. In well-run processes we have observed participants themselves come to recognize the necessity for inclusion if they are to reach robust and usable results.

The work of Jürgen Habermas, particularly his *Theory of Communicative Action*, has often been invoked to help understand consensus building dialogue (Habermas, 1981). His concept of communicative rationality has an uncanny resemblance to the work of serious and skilled consensus building efforts. Exploring his ideas about communicative rationality illuminates consensus building and helps us to theorize this practice. Indeed, my own research on consensus building has been devoted to investigations of cases that come as close as possible to meeting his ideals for a communicatively rational dialogue. My purpose has been to see whether approximating these ideals produces better outcomes than business as usual. Invoking Habermas has, however, led to a spate of criticism directed to the limitations of Habermas' thinking and in turn criticizing consensus building. But it needs to be clear that *consensus building grew up as a practice without knowledge of or reference to Habermas.* Habermas is a social theorist, not an empirical researcher. His ideas have much resonance in practice and help to define a normative ideal for planning theorists, but research on practice does not bear out everything he said. Because we borrow from his insights and ideals does not mean we accept them fully. Planning theorists are bricoleurs, and Habermas offers much to this enterprise, but not everything.

The idea of communicative rationality is an epistemological view, parallel to the idea of scientific method. In this model, where interests engage in dialogue, undistorted by power differentials and information differences and where assumptions are challenged, a kind of truth is formed. Shared understanding develops, reifications are broken down and interests work through their differences to produce more complete, meaningful, and robust knowledge than scientific method or socially-constructed negotiations in situations where controversies and multiple goals and contradictions abound. While my own research bears out this prediction in many ways, the point to keep in mind is that communicative rationality, like scientific method, is an ideal type. It is never fully achieved even in the most rigorous practice. It is important for us to maintain the distinction between Habermas' ideas and what we learn from research on practice.

Several of Habermas' ideas on communicative rationality turn out to be

mirrored quite well in the most sophisticated practice. The technology is, for example, very well developed on how to create undistorted communications or ideal speech conditions. Professional facilitators know how to make sure that utterances around the table are comprehensible to all, how to assure that each stakeholder is a legitimate representative of an interest, and (with funding) how to make sure that technically accurate information becomes an integral part of the dialogue. As consensus building necessarily takes months or even years, stakeholders around the table become quite good at assessing each other's sincerity and realizing that if they are insincere they will be discovered and ineffective.

Habermas' notion of interests being part of the dialogue is also an important component of the practice. In many cases stakeholders expand their group to encompass others, even those who have opposed them, as they come to realize these players have a stake. They do this because they recognize they need these other stakeholders' knowledge and buy-in for the process to be successful. For example, in the California Growth Management Consensus project, business and environmental stakeholders sought out disadvantaged and minority stakeholders because they needed their support for any program of managing growth that would inevitably affect the welfare of rural and inner city poor (Innes et al., 1994). The questioning of assumptions, which is part of Habermas' model, is absolutely critical in practice, as my colleagues and I have observed numerous times. The creativity and way out of impasses are often arrived at only after challenging the status quo or questioning the assumptions that lie behind the impasse. Just raising such questions makes people think in new ways.

One way Habermas' theory does not mirror practice, however, is that in consensus building the discussion does not proceed through the force of the better argument, as he suggests. In these processes logical deductive argumentation from goals to objectives does not work, and in the many processes I have observed, no one really tries to use this method of persuasion. People soon discover they do not share sufficient goals or worldviews for this type of argument to be effective. Instead, they ask each other questions, learn about the problem and each other, and then engage in collective story telling. They try to make sense through these stories (Forester, 1999). Participants tell stories to describe their interests; they tell stories to identify and label the problems; they tell stories to imagine what will happen if nothing is done; they tell stories to describe the harm that will come to them and their constituencies if some proposed action is taken and they collectively weave new stories for a future out of the pieces of stories each brings to the table. They search for a future scenario where all their interests are met to some degree, or at least better than they would be if they had not come together (Forester, 1999; Innes and Booher, 1999b; Throgmorton, 1996).

Critics of consensus building raise a variety of other concerns, many of which are built on incorrect assumptions about the theory and the practice

of consensus building. The first concern is that consensus building does not take power into account and that powerful players will inevitably co-opt the other players, control the outcomes, and dominate the process. They do not believe that power can be equalized in the dialogue and fault the theory for even suggesting that. The first response to this concern is that a distinction must be made between power around the table and power outside the dialogue. The former can largely be equalized with skillful management of dialogue, shared information, and education of the stakeholders. The latter is untouched by consensus building. Everyone at the table knows who is powerful outside, who is not and what power each player has. This awareness is a constant underlying the dialogue, and the facts and reality of existing power are integral to the discussion. On the other hand, players who are powerful enough to achieve their interests alone would not be at the table. Each player at the table wants something from one or more of the others. Consensus building is not, in any case, the place for redistributing power. This can and, in many cases, should be done outside of and before a consensus building process, for example, by giving resources to poorer stakeholders so they can hire their own experts or giving them some leverage over actions in the public arena. Often lawsuits and social movements are necessary to assure that these weaker players have something to bring to the table.

The problem of and potential for co-optation is real, but skilled process and meeting management can reduce this. Co-optation of weaker players by stronger ones happens when the stakeholders are unaware of their own leverage and the ways in which other players need what they have to offer. In a well-designed process, interests are put on the table and clearly discussed in a context where all have access to and understanding of the same information. Co-optation can also happen if some stakeholders are simply pleased to be part of the dialogue and they do not therefore hold out for meeting their group's interest. This problem can be reduced by requiring that stakeholder representatives regularly check in with their groups and discuss the options that are on the table as well as continuously review their options inside and outside the process (their BATNAs). Again these are standard practices in well-run consensus building projects.

Despite differentials in power, however, the dialogue itself can change minds and perceptions of what is in one's interest as players learn about opportunities for collective action, build social and political capital among themselves, and learn about other players' perspectives and needs. In particular, those weaker, disadvantaged groups represented at the table may never have been able to participate meaningfully in a policy discussion before. For them participation can be empowering as first, they meet powerful players face to face, then second, learn about realities that they have not been exposed to before, and third and most important, as they get to express their needs and perceptions in a context where they are heard by these powerful players. While this does not mean that these powerful

stakeholders will do something fundamentally against their interests because of what they learn, it often means, in our observation and according to our interviews with participants in many processes, that the group's norms and collective values to some degree come to incorporate the concerns of these weaker interests. Players may change their expectations because they can still get what they want without compromising their welfare if they provide some benefit to these groups. They may do this because they want the legitimacy of the support of these groups. But their changed views may also be the result of discovering things they did not know because of the local knowledge of these groups. Sometimes they learn about the needs of these groups and come to agree that something they would not have considered earlier is the right thing to do. This kind of dynamic, of course, depends on the building of trust and social capital among the players (Thomas, 2001).

As we have argued elsewhere (Booher and Innes, 2002), consensus building and collaborative dialogue can also create a new form of power which we called network power. The participants build relationships, mutual understanding and shared heuristics and understanding of the system. These developments, in turn, mean that they collectively have a power to influence change or produce their desired outcomes. This is a form of power that grows as it is shared and is not a zero sum game, where what one gains the other loses. This is a form of power from which both the most and least powerful can benefit. Creation of this power can be one of the most potent incentives for participants to stay at the table and continue to work together even after the immediate project is completed. Network power is the glue for collaboration over time.

Another common critique is that consensus building results in nothing more than compromise and lowest common denominator solutions, often reached through peer pressure. Hillier is concerned in particular that consensus building may suppress agonistic tensions and subsume contradictions (Hillier, 2003). Others have also suggested that conflict is incompatible with consensus building. This is an understandable concern, as the term consensus is often used for the sort of passive, reluctant agreement most of us have dealt with in meetings. Critics often extrapolate from their own experience or from observation of poorly managed processes to reach this conclusion. Systematic study of processes that come close to meeting the conditions for authentic dialogue described above show however that this sort of pseudo-consensus is seldom, if ever, the result. This sort of dialogue assures that interests are not ignored. In any case, there would be no need to go to the trouble of consensus building if groups were simply to make tradeoffs or propose lowest common denominator solutions. This is business as usual and we do not need any special technology for this. Standard political and planning processes already work in this way.

Consensus building emerges as a practice exactly in the cases where controversy is high, where goals and interests conflict, and where

contradictions prevent bureaucracies from acting and political deal makers from being successful. Conflict is ever present throughout a consensus building process. Stakeholders grow angry, threaten to leave, and are constantly aware of the fundamentally different interests that separate them and the conflicting strategies their constituencies have traditionally followed. This very conflict however is what makes consensus building capable of producing robust results. The ideas and knowledge are tested and developed in a crucible of constant tensions. These tensions resonate deeply with the ideas of Frankfurt School critical theorists, who emphasize the importance of contradictions in the development of emancipatory knowledge (Bernstein, 1976). In the process of collaborative dialogue, participants often discover ways in which they can jointly meet their own interests and those of others. Participants discover that there are options more beneficial to their interests than what they had in mind when they thought they had to act alone. For example, in California water management, interests competing for the water supply have discovered a joint management process that allows for more efficient and shared use of water as an alternative to the zero sum game over limited water in which these players were engaging until consensus building began (Hudzik, 2003). Stakeholders enter the process to serve their interests. They give up nothing they have outside the process unless it benefits them. Exit is always an option. That ever-present option helps maintain the tensions that force higher quality solutions that resolve more issues.

Many commentators focus on agreements as the main purpose of consensus building. They evaluate a consensus process solely based on whether or not an agreement was reached and implemented though, as discussed above, many other results are likely to be more important and more enduring, though less recognized. While typically a formal consensus building process ends with agreement on many actions and proposals, loose ends and unresolved conflicts invariably remain. In the process the stakeholders have become acutely conscious of the unpredictability of the future and the potential for unanticipated consequences of their proposals. Many consensus building processes therefore beget second and even third stage collaborative efforts to deal with implementation and necessary future revisions to original agreements. This continuing consensus building represents an emerging institutional form for dealing with ongoing change and controversy. Critics often suggest that the goal or outcome of consensus building is harmony, but this is not the case. What successful consensus building achieves is not harmony but rather a social order within which differences can be discussed and addressed and joint action can be taken. It is a framework within which creativity and adaptive responses to a changing world can be a norm rather than an exception.

Another largely unsupported inference drawn by some critics is that consensus building is a waste of time because players may opt out of agreements at any time. This is of course technically true, but in practice there

are many reasons why, after a well-designed consensus building effort, they seldom do so. Consensus building typically produces a package of interlinked actions and proposals. Sometimes some stakeholders are not happy with the package, but even they may decide not to oppose it if every effort has been made to meet their interests and if they have gotten some of the things they want. The package itself creates an incentive for continuing joint support after the process is over because there are aspects that are valuable to everyone. These packages are increasingly supplemented by assurances strategies to allow, for example, environmentalists to trust that habitat will be preserved so they can allow the development to go forward which will pay the costs of habitat conservation. Perhaps the most important reason that stakeholders are apt to stick with their agreements is that they want to work with the other players in the future. It becomes important to them to be trusted, and in any case they have built working relationships with other players that often extend into other aspects of their work. They recognize that in a rapidly changing world the agreement may become obsolete in a short time, but they also know that they will have the means and trust to collaboratively develop needed adaptations in the future.

Even so, there are a few defectors during and after some consensus building processes, but sophisticated participants expect and understand this phenomenon. In the process they have learned to understand others' interests, and they may even empathize when an opposing group sees its interests as better served by going it alone. This defection may happen because conditions have changed which affect a player's BATNA so that cooperation appears to offer fewer opportunities than independent action. A consensus building process which has built understanding and trust over time among stakeholders who share an interest in an issue, however, often in itself changes BATNAs, making collaboration a more attractive option than it might have been at the outset. Moreover, as public agencies come to prefer having the interests work out issues among themselves, as they have in a number of arenas in California, most notably water, they are less open to pressure from individual stakeholders. This change in turn increases the incentives for stakeholders to work within a collaborative framework.

Consensus building is not a panacea. It is time-consuming and requires skilled staffing. It only makes sense in situations where stakeholders are not satisfied with their options working alone or with a few others and where significant problems that they all care about demand solution. It is only worth doing when acceptable solutions are not emerging from traditional decision making processes. It is only worth doing when there are controversies and differences in values and understandings. Otherwise, elected officials and public agencies can make acceptable decisions and plans themselves. Consensus building cannot work when key stakeholders have no incentive to come to the table. It is not called for if stakeholders do not have reciprocal interests. It cannot work if there is no compelling reason that can be framed for stakeholders to take the time and energy to come to

the table, or if there is no likely impact that the process can have on the real world. It can fail if stakeholders are excluded whose interests are fundamentally involved.

Consensus building is called for where uncertainty is rampant, where no one has enough power to produce results working alone, where stakeholders are engaged in self-defeating and paralyzing conflict, where there are gaps in understanding and in discourses among players, where the solutions to well-recognized problems have not been developed or where old solutions no longer work. The conditions of a global postmodern world have contributed to the demand for consensus building because of the speed of technological and social change, the fragmentation of power, and the juxtaposition of more and more conflicting values and views in public life. The demand for collaborative dialogue is growing around the world. It is growing especially in California, where despite deep budget cuts, public agencies are increasingly demanding the services of facilitators.[8]

It is my hope that planning theorists will in the future make fewer assumptions about the nature of this emerging practice and spend more time learning from it and building on it. It is my hope they will make distinctions in their discussions between grand social theory and theory grounded in empirical evidence. Ultimately it is my hope that we as a community of scholars can engage in a constructive and informed dialogue about the limitations and values of consensus building, and its appropriate role in society in general and in planning in particular.

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Notes

1. Unknown (2003) submitted to this article's author for blind review by a journal.
2. Typical ground rules include the need for participants to report on their outside activities that may affect or even counteract the consensus building task, rules about dealing with the media, or rules about stakeholders' need to keep their constituencies informed.
3. Interest-based bargaining involves stakeholders explaining and trying to achieve their basic interests, which may be done in a variety of ways. Positional bargaining involves stakeholders in presenting their cases in terms of particular solutions or actions. For example, stakeholders can say their interest is protection of endangered species, or alternatively that a particular piece of land needs to be set aside for that species. In the former case many alternatives may serve the purpose and other interests such as those of the landholder may be met. In the latter there is likely to be an impasse early on in the discussions.

4. This term in practice is not used to refer to 100 percent agreement. Typically a recommended and achievable goal is 80–90 percent, making sure that stakeholders from all the major interests are included. Sometimes decision rules can be quite complex, but each group decides on rules that make sense for their situation. Some outliers can be people who are positional or even ideological and unlikely to agree with anything other than their original objective. The wisdom of practice is that an overwhelming and diverse majority accomplishes the purposes and keeps people at the table who would otherwise leave. Often players may oppose a proposal but be willing to step aside and not register their opposition – essentially to abstain. They do so because it does not serve their interests though it does not necessarily harm them or because there is something in the proposal that their constituency may not approve of though much of it the representative believes is beneficial to them.
5. These principles are applied by the leading practitioners in the USA and a number of books and articles confirm that these are considered best practices (Innes and Booher, 2003; Susskind et al., 1999; Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000).
6. It is important to note that the claim of these literatures is that many of these results can occur if these conditions are met, not that they invariably do. Many external factors also influence these results.
7. At the Community Based Collaboratives Research Consortium Workshop on Assessing Environmental Outcomes in Snowbird, Utah in September 2003 it was agreed among the participants who were both scholars and practitioners that collaboratives had a variety of purposes, including monitoring, capacity building and problem solving. Agreements were only a goal in some of the processes.
8. For example, the state's Center for Collaborative Policy is having trouble meeting the demand from public agencies for its services.

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