

WHAT IS COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY? WHAT DO INVESTMENTS IN COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY MAKE POSSIBLE?

Research Brief | November 2023

We are at a pivotal inflection point for addressing landscape scale challenges in the United States and across the globe. From climate change and land-use planning to water management and environmental justice, complex and increasingly urgent issues cross political boundaries, scales, demographics, and sectors.

Collaboration is paramount for successfully addressing these issues, and practitioners, funders, and researchers all have a role to play in finding and implementing landscape-scale solutions. However, even when diverse groups work together, success isn't guaranteed.

Collaborative capacity is essential for all kinds of partnerships, groups, and networks to effectively work together. Yet even those who support this work are not entirely familiar with what collaborative capacity is, nor why it's important. Network practitioners, funders, and researchers need more information about collaborative practice so they can partner for greater impact at scale. To help address this need, the California Landscape Stewardship Network commissioned a study that explored the elements of collaborative capacity and the essential role it plays in achieving social and ecological goals.



KEY FINDINGS

What is collaborative capacity?

A diverse range of conservation and stewardship practitioners and funders from across the country helped validate the [California Landscape Stewardship Network's Collaborative Capacity Framework](#) (2022) and adapt its six capacity elements to include:

- coordination and facilitation support;
- decision-making structures;
- collaborative practice, skills, and tools;
- systems and infrastructure;
- shared strategies and priorities; and
- collective purpose and goals.

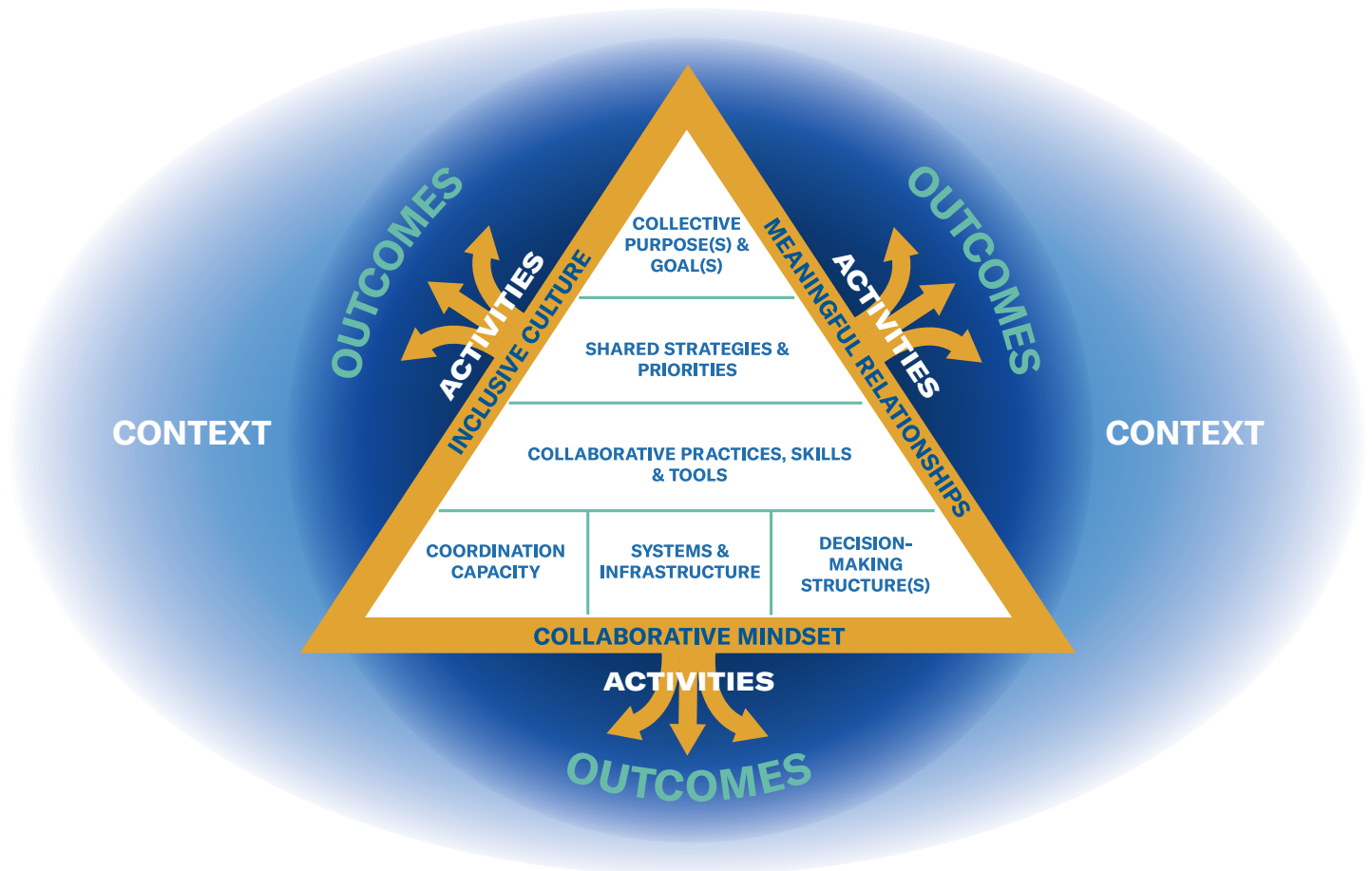
What does collaborative capacity make possible?

The study found compelling evidence that collaborative capacity both enables collaborative activities and leads to an array of desirable social and ecological outcomes.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES. Collaborative capacity allows practitioners to engage in activities that build the knowledge, relationships, and pathways that lead to real-world outcomes at scale and create new opportunities.

These activities include:

- **situation assessments, public and stakeholder engagement, and interactive meetings and convenings** to build awareness and inclusion;
- **relationship-building**, to foster empathy and trust;
- **identification of shared purposes**, to drive and sustain collaboration;
- **cross-partner actions, communication, and resource sharing**, to get more done on the ground; and
- **evaluation, training, and mentoring**, to build upon and improve their collaborative work.



KEY FINDINGS

As suggested by similar research and affirmed by collaborative practitioners around the country, **context** is key. Geography, policy environment, history, power dynamics, and the collaborative's phase can either enable or constrain capacity elements and collaborative activities and affect their quality.

SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL OUTCOMES. This study affirmed a clear relationship between collaborative capacity and a practitioner's ability to:

- accomplish collective environmental goals;
- holistically plan and manage at a variety of scales;
- leverage funding and mobilize resources;
- improve interpersonal relationships and build social capital;
- achieve individual organizational goals; and
- connect to a growing field of practitioners.

“We’ve seen an efflorescence of collaborative conservation, especially at the landscape scale. It has become more and more apparent that those endeavors really require underpinnings and support beyond the individual project investments.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRACTITIONERS, FUNDERS, AND RESEARCHERS?

The study both affirms and strengthens what is known about collaborative capacity and its role in delivering on-the-ground outcomes in ways that are valuable to practitioners, funders, and the research community.

Practitioners

With a clearer understanding of what drives collaborative success, practitioners can better diagnose challenges, build strategies and programs, target investments, and demonstrate the relationship between collaborative capacity funding and on-the-ground outcomes. Moreover, using a shared framework will help them track, monitor, and improve collaborative capacity investments over time.

We encourage practitioners to use the framework in a variety of ways, including to:

- build shared knowledge and language, including with funders and policymakers;
- develop customized tools and approaches to meet individual collaborative needs; policymakers;
- improve storytelling, grant writing, and annual reporting; and
- document and share best practices and lessons learned.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRACTITIONERS, FUNDERS, AND RESEARCHERS?

Funders

Funders may use this study to consider how investments in one or more collaborative capacity elements can complement traditional project-based funding. Because funding collaborative capacity is often considered different than funding a project or program, they need to work with practitioners and other partners to develop strategies for how to support this work and measure the effectiveness of their investments.

Specific actions funders should take include:

- changing grant-making requirements and reporting to accommodate the unique features of investing in collaborative capacity, such as allowing longer timeframes and more flexibility;
- integrating investments in collaborative capacity with project implementation to support the elements that make positive, on-the-ground outcomes possible;
- funding peer learning and exchange through regional and national networks to help practitioners enhance the quality and effectiveness of their collaborative activities; and
- building in funding and reporting practices for investments in collaborative capacity that foster consistency, transparency, accountability, and accessibility.

Researchers

This study did not address all of the important questions that need to be answered. The research community could continue these lines of inquiry to yield new insights that can help funders and practitioners address the pressing landscape stewardship challenges they collectively face.

Most importantly, we encourage researchers to:

- co-produce a research agenda with practitioners and funders for a more in-depth exploration of the relationship between collaborative capacity elements and desired outcomes,
- better define the terms “capacity” and “outcomes” so they may be more easily measured, and
- explore and identify essential collaborative skillsets.



Visitors in Muir Woods, California.
Photo provided courtesy of the National Park Service.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRACTITIONERS, FUNDERS, AND RESEARCHERS?

Collaborative Capacity in Action

The Network for Landscape Conservation's [Catalyst Fund Program](#) (Catalyst Fund) specifically focuses on collaborative capacity investments. Based on the idea that under-investment has limited our ability to meet landscape-scale conservation and stewardship challenges, the fund supports a broad array of collaborative capacity elements selected by applicants.

Their funding is combined with an in-depth peer learning and knowledge-/skill-building experience that improves the quality of the collaborative activities enabled by their support. Since 2019, the Catalyst Fund has provided more than \$1.6 million in strategic collaborative capacity investments, a portion of which has been directed to Indigenous-led partnerships.

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For further reading, please find the full white paper at https://calandscapestewardshipnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/Collaborative_Capacity_White_Paper_Baxter_and_Land_2023_0.pdf.

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Seamus Land grew up on the Central Coast of California, where he gained a love for the landscape through ecological restoration and play. After completing his MS in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana he has worked on a variety of collaborative restoration efforts around Western Montana. In addition to this research fellowship, Seamus teaches Ethics of Restoration as an adjunct professor at UM.