

How Collaborative Advantage Can Deliver Low Carbon Solutions



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

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Overview

Collaborative advantage is the concept that a group acting collectively can deliver more than the sum of their parts. The importance of collaborative advantage is shown by its inclusion as the final United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). Naming “Partnerships for the Goals” as a separate goal is a testament to the significance of collaboration, particularly for the type of systems change required by the other 16 SDGs.

Although forming collaborations is a powerful strategy to tackle complex problems such as climate change, it is notoriously difficult to implement in practice. Collaborations fail because of a lack of trust, competitive self-interest and failure to agree on shared objectives.

In May 2019, a group of stakeholders from the heavy transport sector was brought together by the Sustainable Business Council (sbc.org.nz) to explore how to deliver low carbon solutions for the sector. The group identified opportunities to transition the freight sector to net zero by 2050. Participants believed the ambitious goal could be achieved through true collaboration, sharing a vision, knowledge and resources.



The collaboration began in February 2020, completing its work in April 2021 with the launch of the Low Carbon Pathway Report (<https://www.sbc.org.nz/insights/2021/low-carbon-freight-pathway>).

The collaboration was documented so that the learnings could be shared to make future efforts more effective. The researcher had access as an observer to all meetings and meeting documents. Collaboration participants were interviewed after the collaboration in November and December 2020 (before the report launch in April). Quotes in the report are from the collaboration participants.

Associate Professor Eva Collins
Waikato Management School



Why Collaborate?

Collaborations create scalable solutions beyond one organisation.

“We see a responsibility in the freight network to contribute to the solutions that will enable a lower carbon way of working and we understand it’s not only just what we can influence from our own direct network.”

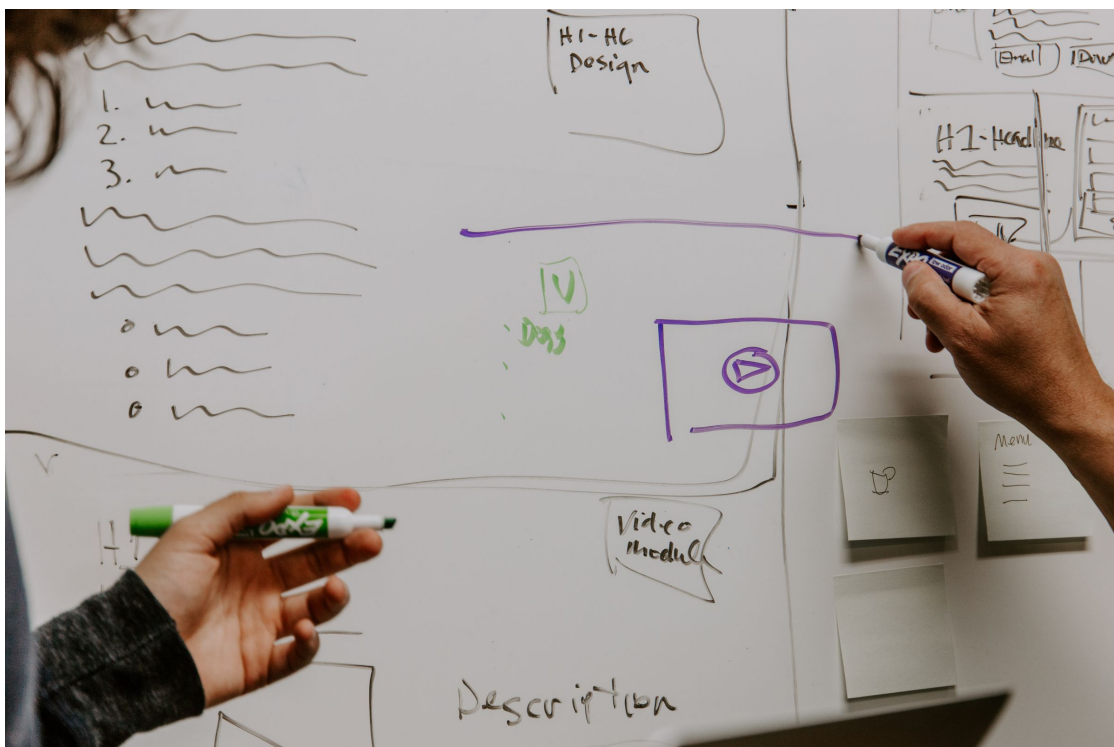
Why Collaborate?

Collaboration delivers extra value compared with a single-actor because the pooling of knowledge and resources combines with diverse thinking to allow adaptive solutions to emerge. Adaptive solutions are needed when both the problem and solution are unclear and new learning is needed by all participants, often requiring a change in values, beliefs and/or behaviours.

The key driver for businesses choosing to participate in the collaboration was that the goal aligned with their own strategic objectives for carbon reduction.

Participants for the collaboration were selected by SBC because they had a shared objective of finding low carbon solutions. In addition, many of the heavy transport participants said they were motivated to participate because they wanted to contribute to the greater good. They were participating in the collaboration because "it was the right thing to do for NZ Inc."

For a collaboration to be successful, it is not enough to gather the willing.



Right People, Right Place, Right Time



Low carbon freight pathway



For businesses, the focus of any collaboration needs to be material to their operations, however that is not sufficient to ensure the collaboration will be successful. Successful collaborations require careful partner selection to establish trust. The more businesses engage in collaboration, the more they target their collaboration energy, becoming strategically selective with whom they want to engage.

“We get asked to be involved in a lot given who we are, our goals and profile, but we’ve had to be choosy because otherwise we’d just be giving the whole time. From a purely selfish point of view, are we going to get something out of it? Is it someone we’ve worked with before and are familiar with, and will it help with NZ Inc?”

Right People, Right Place, Right Time

"I am what you would call a seasoned collaboration cynic. I am lucky enough to have 25 years of supply chain experience. Collaboration, where I've been involved, lots of nice talking and no action."

"I think two things have changed. The subject matter requires collaboration to be more serious now, stakes are higher, and I think, at some point as a society and business community, we evolve."

Right People, Right Place, Right Time

Some businesses are not far enough along the collaboration continuum to be seeking systemic change, but rather are interested in transactional engagements. The focus of this report is how to effectively collaborate for systemic change.

There were a range of answers to the question, "Were the right people at the table?" Everyone agreed the group was broad and diverse and everyone also noted that they learned and gained insights about the issues and the players by participating in the collaboration. That learning was a key benefit commonly cited in the interviews.

Most of the participants were experienced collaborators. The *individuals* at the table are just as important as the organisation they represent. A key reason businesses come together to collaborate is to gain diversity of thinking.

"We want those different opinions and seeing it from a different perspective. Really consolidating the thought that you've got to find a mix that's fit for purpose for different organisations and creating that flexibility and opportunities to bring everyone along."

Right People, Right Place, Right Time

Critical individual competencies required for effective collaboration include empathy, complex problem-solving, design thinking, negotiation, and the ability to apply a systems approach.

Diversity of thinking in collaborations is an overall positive, however it does come with challenges. For example, the heavy transport group had a mix of sustainability expertise and supply chain and logistics expertise.

“There were a number of people in the collaboration who were trying to contribute, but didn't have the technical knowledge to contribute and that was a frustration to me. You can't just say this is good, that's good, you have to have some understanding of the application.”

A counter view was:

“That mix of roles and focus, and really good facilitation, meant we didn't get railroaded or agendized.”

It is clear from the interviews that the group was diverse and all interviewees cited both benefits and challenges from that diversity.

Collaboration During Covid

Covid forced the collaboration into an on-again/ off-again pattern due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. In the end, however, the project was pushed out by only four months due to Covid. The meetings over the course of the collaboration were a mix of in-person, hybrid (with participants online and some in-person), and all participants online.

When asked about format preferences, interviewees discussed the importance of the first meeting being in-person and long enough to get to know people in the room. Interviewees thought online also worked, but were most critical when the sessions were hybrid. There was a common feeling that those in the room were the dominant voice and that those participating online were disadvantaged.

Timings are different for in-person vs online. Meetings were typically three hours and one interviewee stated that worked if you were in person, but that was a long time to be connected online. "If you're in person, then it's doable because you know, there's food, there's coffee, there's chit chat."

As SBC and its members examine their own carbon footprint, meetings in person may become rarer in national collaborations. One interviewee stated, "It was more convenient to participate remotely regardless of Covid."

Some interviewees thought that parts of the collaborative lent itself to online, while other parts of the process needed to be in-person.

Collaboration During Covid



“One of the things that often happens is that there's this period where it can get really messy and uncomfortable. And you're not really sure how you're going to get to an answer at the end. And I think that plays out more easily if it's done in person, because you get quite a high level of discomfort for a little while, when you have loads of post-its and you're trying to just sort of get through how do we shape this all together. What should be going where and what boxes, you have to just sort of stand back and look at things.”

Going Slow to Go Fast

Careful selection of collaborators to ensure shared purpose, individual collaborative capabilities while maintaining diversity, helps to overcome some of the common collaborative barriers. Trust, however, trumps everything else. Trust is essential for open communication and transparency.

So how can trust be developed?

Kate Ferguson, Climate Manager of SBC and the facilitator of the collaboration stated, "If you apply the adage, you have to go slow to go fast, we have been quite intentional about that so they are energised to do the serious bit, which is how do we get these solutions implemented?"

What she meant was that the beginning is the most important part of the collaboration. As discussed above, participants stressed the importance of the first meeting. Gaining agreement on the scope and objective(s) of the collaboration, what the personal and organisational commitments will be and getting to know fellow collaborators are actions that start to build trust. As one interviewee stated, "It's harder to be non-cooperative if you have gotten to know someone."



Going Slow to Go Fast

One interviewee even suggested the first meeting should be in-person and mandatory.

"The only think I would have changed was being more insistent about the importance of the first meeting because I didn't know everyone there and I'm a believer that you just need to mix, especially if you are going to be working together for a year. Being able to meet in person and do a bit of getting to know people and understand where they are would make the online stuff easier."

Having an effective facilitator can help build a culture of collaborative trust. Key tasks of the facilitator include keeping in touch with individuals throughout the process, keeping the sense of momentum and maintaining engagement until the end delivery dates. As one participant explained:

"She was able to direct traffic as needed. But she was aware of her position, not wanting to influence and really just being that matchmaker for the people in the collaboration."

Conflicting Tempos and Other Roadblocks

"Every organisation has a different tempo and that's the bit that often trips collaborations up because one's ready to move when the other's not and understanding what drives the tempo. Every organisation has a different team. If you have a common purpose, you can overcome the tempo conflict."



When questioned about roadblocks to collaboration, the mixed format (online/in-person) was often mentioned. The diversity of the group was sometimes mentioned as a roadblock, but as stated above, it was equally cited as a strength.

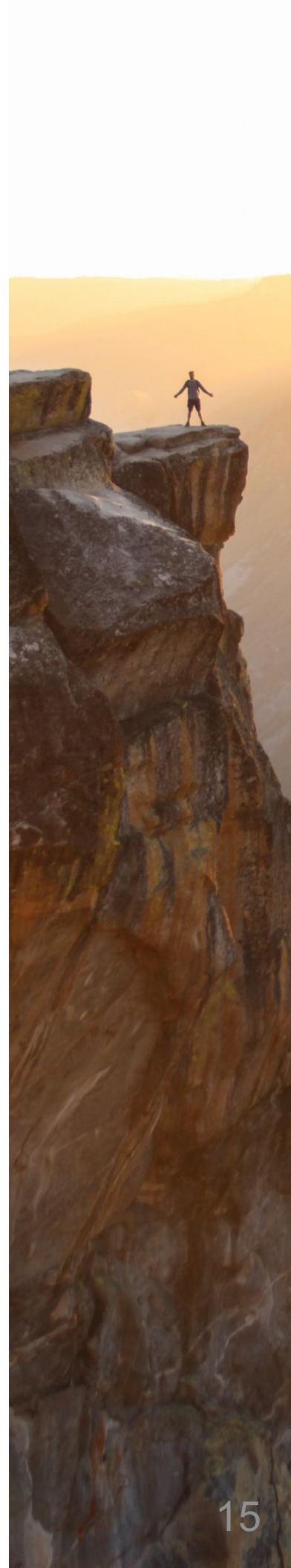
What Does Success Look Like?

Most of the participants did not have specific or formal KPIs for the collaboration.

“We didn't have specific metrics. But participation increased our awareness. And sustainable logistics, working in a symbiotic relationship with suppliers and customers. This is a good starting point. But we didn't have specific metrics or targets.”

Although businesses did not have success metrics, they did have overarching goals they were trying to achieve. A common goal was to come together with an amplified voice to the government.

“The key thing for me was to have the alignment we needed across industry to get the support we need from government around the transition to a zero emission approach. If we have a consolidated voice to government, that will help us speed up our transition to zero emissions fuels, but there are a lot of challenges.”



What Does Success Look Like?

Another cited goal for half of participants was to benchmark their own carbon activities against others in the sector.

"It was an opportunity to gain even more knowledge and understanding about the role of those energy processes in the future so that was valuable so we could see how that matched up with our own plan."

Importantly for SBC, all participants stated that the collaboration met or exceeded their expectations. Some qualified that assessment by stating that the next part, the rollout of the report, would determine the success of the collaboration. In answer to the question of whether the collaboration met expectations, one interviewee said:

"I was happy with the output, I didn't agree with all of it. If I agreed with everything then we probably were not challenging enough."

Some members of the group are continuing to collaborate beyond the formal group, experimenting with other low carbon initiatives. Although it is difficult to capture and quantify the impact of the unanticipated sub-collaboration, for those members involved, it is seen as very valuable.

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