Exploring the Criteria and Processes of Collaborative Governance for SDG Implementation in Portugal

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This work contributes to the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Article

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Abstract Sustainable development requires legitimate coordination of cross-sector trade-offs across environmental limits, social needs, and long-term economic viability. Because the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relies on multi-actor arrangements, collaborative governance (CG) design features may condition whether participation translates into joint decision-making. CG emerges from these dynamic strategies to produce public products and services with multiple stakeholders, aligning and integrating the various parties' ambitions. Given the ongoing discussion on SDGs, marked by the complexity and interdependence of actors, innovative, collaborative solutions are needed to achieve the desired goals. This necessity is further underscored by introducing a goal related to partnerships and collaboration: "Partnerships for Development" (Goal 17), demonstrating that collaboration is a crucial element for sustainable development and the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Thus, this study aims to explore how CG supports strategies to implement the SDGs. To this end, through content analysis, we examine four initiatives involving public and private actors related to the implementation of the SDGs in Portugal. We aim to analyze whether these meet the criteria of CG and the various dimensions anticipated for its process. Only one initiative meets the criteria for CG, and Portugal still needs an established collaborative governance arrangement for implementing the SDGs. Therefore, it is necessary to invest in collaborative arrangements initiated by public organizations that allow for participation in decision-making and greater consensus-building, preserving a real contribution to public policy and a better understanding of the impacts and benefits of collaboration. It is also necessary to discuss the need for metagovernance structures for sustainable development.

Keywords post-new public management reforms; collaborative governance; Sustainable Development Goals; 2030 Agenda

1. Introduction

Traditional governance models and management approaches that involve only one organization have yet to prove sufficient to address complex social problems that transcend organizational boundaries, such as poverty, corruption, economic development, and public health. In this context, sustainability has become an overarching normative and policy framework. At its core, sustainability concerns the integration of environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability, guided by principles of intergenerational and territorial justice [1,2].

Sustainable development is commonly defined as development that meets the needs of current generations without sacrificing the needs of future generations. The emphasis on future generations places the time dimension at the center of the concept: sustainability requires a long-term horizon and the recognition that decisions made today shape the opportunities and risks faced by those who come after us. Yet, sustainability has often been used as a powerful discourse and guiding norm without always being operationalized in a way that is empirically testable or institutionally enforceable. This tension, between broad normative ambition and practical governance capacity, helps explain why sustainability remains challenging to implement [3].

Achieving sustainable development is therefore not a single policy act but an ongoing process of negotiation, learning, and consensus-building, aimed at reconciling improvements in socio-economic conditions with the protection of environmental well-being. Recent studies indicate that sustainability and sustainable development concepts are becoming more commonplace in

the discipline of Public Administration (PA). This trend is consistent with PA's mission to strengthen the capacity of public institutions to produce positive societal outcomes, especially under conditions of complexity and contested legitimacy. Sustainability, understood as the capacity to maintain, support, and preserve what is valued over time, is thus inseparable from governance arrangements capable of steering collective choices, managing conflicts, and sustaining implementation across policy cycles [4].

The focus of New Public Management (NPM) on disaggregation and increased competition has led to the fragmentation of Public Administration, creating a greater number of organizational units. This has increased the complexity of relations in the public sector, negatively affecting citizens' ability to understand the state and its structures [5].

In this context, Post-New Public Management reforms emerge, oriented towards establishing inter-organizational relationships to improve public sector performance and achieve efficiency and effectiveness [6]. These movements and reforms favored greater horizontal coordination between state organizations, mitigating the harmful effects caused by NPM and seeking to replicate this greater coordination in environments with the representation of non-state actors [6,7].

While hierarchical and market mechanisms continue to play a vital role in the organization and regulation of public services, the collaboration associated with Post-New Public Management movements has increasingly become important in public action contexts, increasing the number of studies that have sought to explore the cooperation at various scales and levels [8].

These studies explore the concept of "collaborative governance" and related concepts, such as "interactive governance", "governance-beyond-the-state", "partnership paradigm", "joined-up government", "network governance", or simply "governance" [9]. Collaborative governance (CG) refers to strategies for producing public goods and services that involve multiple stakeholders and align their goals throughout the process [9,10].

Collaborative approaches are particularly relevant for complex, systemic problems that demand the commitment and actions of interdependent actors and cannot be governed solely through regulatory policies, given the high costs of regulation and the inevitable politicization of issues with conflicting interests. In response to the limitations of hierarchical market models, policy studies have promoted deliberative and interactive modes to formulate shared goals and to engage diverse societal actors in implementing and promoting them. The value of multi-stakeholder collaboration is recognized in sustainability studies. A key driver of the growing salience of collaborative governance is the well-documented limits of hierarchical approaches when tackling cross-sector, "wicked" sustainability challenges. Advancing sustainability, therefore, requires the purposeful engagement of business, civil society, and other societal stakeholders in the co-design and implementation of public sustainability strategies [11].

Sustainability governance, by definition, must integrate environmental boundaries, social foundations, and long-term economic viability, ensuring that development remains within planetary limits while promoting human well-being and prosperity over time. This integrative ambition is embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which materialize the new approach to global governance by goal setting. By bringing together environmental, social, and economic objectives within a single, overarching framework, the SDGs underscore the need for collaborative and adaptive institutional arrangements that span governance levels and sectors. Such arrangements must be able to openly negotiate and manage trade-offs between potentially competing objectives (e.g., growth versus conservation, equity versus efficiency), make these choices transparent, and strengthen accountability for outcomes. At the same time, the SDGs require broad participation from states, civil society, and the private sector to build and sustain legitimacy around shared goals, promote policy coherence, and stimulate learning and innovation in implementation [1,2,12].

To examine how such strategies operate in practice, we focus on sustainable development, particularly the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and its SDGs [1]. According to Niesten et al. (2017) [2], many studies show that collaborative efforts can be crucial in sustainable development, highlighting collaboration's role on the research agenda in the coming decades. Thus, this work explores the connection between CG and the SDGs. Building on our specific framework of CG, we explore this claim further and address the following research question: How do design attributes of collaborative governance (public initiation, inclusion of non-public actors, formalization, consensus, and contribution to public policies) shape the ability of SDG-related initiatives in Portugal to generate joint decisions and manage sustainability trade-offs?

Despite successive reforms, Portugal lacks a governance arrangement that, under formal rules, coordinates multiple state and non-state actors to produce joint decisions on sustainable development. In parallel, there is no comparative assessment that links the criteria and processes of collaborative governance across SDG initiatives. The specific objectives of this study are: i) assess whether and how variation in key CG design attributes (public initiation, inclusion of non-public actors, formalization, consensus, and contribution to public policies) is associated with the initiatives' ability to produce joint, policy-relevant decisions and to make decision authority visible; ii) examine the evidence of CG process dynamics (preconditions, development, perceived impacts) in the initiatives' documentation, identifying which process elements are present and which remain weak or absent, and how this affects SDG coordination and learning; iii) identify design gaps and derive recommendations, including metagovernance options, to strengthen Portugal's SDG implementation.

To this end, we present a literature review on the criteria and processes of CG and the SDGs from a theoretical and contextual perspective [13]. Then, we will present the context of SDG implementation in Portugal and analyze whether the criteria and process of CG are visible in the collaborative institutional arrangements identified in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Portugal. For this, we will conduct a documentary analysis of the legal diplomas and activity plans of these initiatives in Portugal. We aim to contribute to a more detailed analysis of CG that can exemplify its contexts of action, proposing a comparative framework that integrates collaborative criteria and processes with evidence on the characteristics of collaboration in the Portuguese SDG context, and outline a metagovernance design to strengthen SDG implementation.

1.1. Sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainability is commonly framed as resting on interconnected pillars, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions or goals. While this tripartite view is widely used in the literature, it remains conceptually ambiguous, and its precise implications are still debated. The concept of sustainable development stems from the growing awareness of the global interconnections between deteriorating environmental pressures, persistent socio-economic challenges such as poverty and inequality, and concerns about safeguarding humanity's long-term well-being, highlighting the intricate coupling between environmental and social conditions. This perspective further acknowledges that earlier growth models, shaped by post-war economic thinking, have not succeeded in eliminating poverty and have done little to close the widening divide between richer and poorer nations. At the same time, these growth patterns have harmed the ecosystems on which societies depend, reinforcing a vicious cycle in which environmental decline and poverty intensify one another. Sustainable development is therefore presented as an alternative pathway, aimed at meeting essential needs, reducing poverty, and promoting a more equitable distribution of resources, standing in clear contrast to dominant development approaches. Consequently, social justice, both for present and future generations, is central to sustainable development. Finally, enduring debates within environmental and socio-economic theory over appropriate goals and the means to achieve them continue to shape how sustainability is defined and put into practice [14,15].

The report "Our Common Future" by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development provided one of the best existing definitions of sustainable development: "Sustainable development is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [12].

Today, sustainable development focuses on integrating environmental, economic, and social concerns into decision-making. It is grounded in six fundamental principles, which the literature identifies: environmental protection, sustainable economic growth, equality, improvement of quality of life, increased participatory democracy, and a holistic, long-term vision [13].

After several years of discussion, in 2015, the United Nations presented the 2030 Agenda, adopting an interconnected set of 17 SDGs for a more sustainable and just world [1]. The SDGs sought to address aspects not covered by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and to be more comprehensive and transformative, integrating a set of objectives that relate to poverty and hunger reduction, greater environmental contributions to biodiversity and climate change, access to justice, and the reduction of inequalities, with better public governance, inclusion, and security [10,16].

Different from the MDGs, adopted between 2000 and 2015, the SDGs have a universal dimension with a cross-cutting character applicable to all countries, not just developing countries [17].

Unlike with the MDGs, Public Administration plays an important role in implementing the SDGs. This is substantiated by public entities' role in the SDGs, acknowledging the need to create public governance mechanisms for this purpose [18].

The alignment of global goals with the circumstances and priorities of countries and the integration and coherence of public policies are crucial for implementing the SDGs. The success of the SDGs will depend on the ability to measure their indicators (the 17 SDGs are based on around 169 indicators and targets) and the inclusion of economic, social, and environmental dimensions, requiring the integration of these aspects into the implementation of the SDGs [19].

The ongoing discussion about the SDGs is marked by the complexity and interdependence of actors, requiring collaborative innovations to achieve the desired goals, as emphasized by Niesten et al. (2017) [2] and Schaltegger et al. (2018) [1]. The 2030 Agenda places greater importance on the participation of various stakeholders, introducing a goal related to partnerships and collaboration: "Partnerships for the Goals" (Goal 17) [20]. This goal seeks to organize efforts for greater cooperation among non-governmental organizations [1,21]. This emphasis points to the complexity and interdependence of sustainability challenges, creating the need to invest in different vertical and horizontal collaborative mechanisms so that actors can align their efforts to achieve common goals [22]. The vertical alignment of the SDGs is realized through intensive dialogue among multiple stakeholders from various sectors and levels of governance, such as academia, businesses, and civil society organizations. Their horizontal alignment must occur due to the interdependent nature of the SDGs, as they seek holistic approaches to address the entire set of SDGs, making it impossible to view each SDG individually [1].

This attention given by the 2030 Agenda is in line with various studies that address collaboration as a sine qua non-condition for sustainable development and the process of implementing the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda [1,2,20]. The criteria for collaborative governance serve as design levers to ensure that SDG participation translates into shared choices and policy impact [1,21,23].

1.2. Collaborative Governance

CG has increasingly become a well-known term in Public Administration [23], corresponding to co-production strategies of goods and services that involve multiple actors, aligning their goals and interests [10].

Although public organizations have always collaborated with organizations outside the State in recent years, we have witnessed significant growth in the scale and importance of CG in various countries and governmental areas [24].

Rapid technological changes, resource scarcity, and increasing interdependence among organizations explain the emergence of these collaborative arrangements in Public Administration [24,25]. The emergence of these arrangements is further driven by the growth of increasingly "wicked" social issues, where it is difficult to understand the origin of the problems and the most appropriate solutions to solve them (e.g., migration issues, climate change, and poverty). For these reasons, entities find it difficult to manage these problems individually and to reach an adequate consensus [17,26].

From the perspective of Emerson et al. [23], CG focuses on the involvement of diverse actors from different scales and levels of government and various sectors, who would traditionally be outside the decision-making processes and structures. This type of collaboration assigns a fundamental role to public organizations, substantiated by initiating and encouraging participation.

Collaboration between public organizations and non-state actors represents a new and innovative form of public governance with a broader scope than other participatory approaches because the actors play an essential role in the decision-making process [26].

It is essential to distinguish collaborative governance from public-private partnerships, as both require collaboration. CG further attempts to achieve coordination and joint decision-making based on consensus [27].

In 2008, Ansell & Gash ([28], p. 544) presented one of the most comprehensive definitions of Collaborative Governance: "A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage

public programs or assets". Associated with this definition, Ansell & Gash [28] presented the six main criteria that CG arrangements must meet: i) be initiated by public organizations; ii) include private actors and civil society; iii) involve actors in the decision-making process; iv) be formally organized and meet collectively; v) decisions are made by consensus; vi) contribute to public policies or public management.

In this framework, CG denotes formally organized, public arrangements that may be initiated by public agencies, whether to advance institutional purposes or to comply with mandates, but that necessarily incorporate non-state stakeholders in decision-making with genuine influence and shared responsibility for outcomes. The requirement of formalization distinguishes such arrangements from the informal, routine interactions long cultivated between agencies and interest groups: collaboration here entails an explicit, transparent design for organizing influence rather than ad hoc exchanges. Although ultimate authority may rest with public bodies, collaborative forums are consensus-oriented, convening actors in deliberative, multilateral settings that aim to reach an agreement or, at the very least, identify substantive areas of convergence. The domain is explicitly public, as collaborative governance concerns public policy and public issues, thereby differing from alternative dispute resolution or mediation mechanisms, which are typically directed at private conflicts. While boundaries between public and private can be porous, the concept is restricted to the governance of public affairs [28].

Consensus-building is fundamental in collaborative governance, as it relates to how joint actions are taken to solve public policy problems. For this to happen, actions must have meaning for the participants and dialogue must be conducted with respect and equal opportunities for participation [26].

Thomson et al. (2007) [25] conceptualized five dimensions of collaboration, allowing for an integrated and multidisciplinary view of collaboration: i) governance—the creation of collective structures for joint decision-making and achieving a common goal; ii) administration—the implementation and management of those structures to reach the goal; iii) organizational autonomy—how organizational and collective interests are balanced; iv) mutuality—shared understanding of the benefits of collaboration; v) reciprocity—trust-building among participants ("I will, if you will").

The existing literature on collaborative governance processes has established the following as critical aspects related to this type of relationship: i) predefined conditions for collaboration, ii) development of collaboration, and iii) perceived impacts of collaboration.

The literature clearly defines the predefined conditions for collaboration, showing that these can either facilitate or discourage cooperation among the various parties involved, being directly linked to the motivations for collaboration [28]. The start of collaboration stems from identifying the relevant participants and stakeholders and mapping their competencies, knowledge, and resources, to build an interdependent network of actors capable of responding collectively to complex challenges [29].

The development of collaboration seeks to be cyclical and encompass various phases needed for the collaboration success, from problem definition to the implementation of the collaborative process, and is related to the resources shared among organizations [28,23]. When collaborating, organizations develop processes of trust and understanding, and it becomes easier to achieve the perceived impacts of collaboration [30].

Finally, these impacts correspond to the participant's perception of collaboration's effectiveness in achieving the desired goals and productivity [30]. The perceived results rest on a subjective assessment by the actors directly involved, who are best acquainted with the arrangement's functioning and dynamics [30]. These results stem from collaborative interactions and may lead to intentional or unintentional system changes, thereby altering conditions previously deemed undesirable or in need of transformation [23]. Table 1 summarizes some of the main aspects related to the CG process.

In sustainability settings, the predefined conditions of collaboration, its incentives and constraints, are tightly linked to policy coherence and SDG trade-offs. During development, collaboration relies on trust, a shared understanding, and effective communication, enabling joint problem framing across sectors and the use of evidence, such as targets and baselines. The impacts then materialize as learning, resilience, and public value, reflected in progress on SDG indicators, attention to distributional effects, and intergenerational considerations.

Huxham (1993) [31] introduced the concept of collaborative advantage, noting that it can

Table 1. Examples of aspects related to the collaborative governance process.

Predefined Conditions for Collaboration	Development of Collaboration	Perceived Impacts of Collaboration
• Asymmetries in power, resources, and knowledge • Incentives and constraints to participation • History of cooperation or conflicts • Organizational legitimacy • Partnership characteristics • General environment • Failure of a sector	• Building trust • Commitment to the process • Shared understanding • Intermediate outcomes • Communication • Capacity for action and joint decision-making • Resource sharing • Initial agreements • Leadership • Conflict management • Planning	• Achievement of goals • Improvement of organizational learning • Increased number of interactions • Resilience and reassessment • Public value
Linked to policy coherence & SDG trade-offs	Linked to joint problem framing across sectors and evidence use	Linked to SDG indicators and distributional and intergenerational effects

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Emerson et al. (2012) [23]; Ansell & Gash (2008) [28]; Chen (2010) [30]; Bryson et al. (2006) [32].

occur when a goal is collectively achieved. This goal should have been easier to reach together than it would have been if organizations had attempted to achieve it individually. The notion of collaborative advantage presents collaboration as a positive aspect, minimizing the possibility of public action becoming redundant or divergent.

However, this collaborative advantage can take time, as it depends on establishing an environment of trust and commitment among participants and creating accountability mechanisms. Ansell & Gash (2008) [28] emphasize that possible power imbalances can compromise collaborative processes, mainly because the participants may have different capacities, time, and knowledge to engage in collaborative processes.

CG can have a greater impact if collaborations are intended to serve as a bridge between the public, private, and citizen sectors and if they can become a lasting relationship established through formal norms [26,33]. Dialogue, networks, and institutional capacity are critical factors for maximizing the positive effects of CG [11].

According to Kim (2010) [13], CG processes should focus on building trust, developing a shared understanding of the problem, and sharing resources. Collaborative processes across various sectors and in society are necessary for this to happen. These processes go beyond bottom-up approaches, often involving strong imposition by more powerful actors who may exclude relevant voices.

Existing scholarship clarifies what collaboration is (criteria) and how it unfolds (process); few integrated, comparative appraisals apply both strands to national SDG arrangements. The field calls for critical, comparative applications of the prevailing framework to distinguish well-supported components from more speculative ones and to test scalability across policy arenas. In response to this agenda, we translate the framework into a criterion–process evidence map and apply it comparatively to Portuguese SDG initiatives, thereby identifying which elements are empirically robust in this context and which require adjustments in metagovernance or further theorization.

1.3. Collaborative Governance for Sustainability and SDG Implementation

Bridging sustainability and collaborative governance requires translating CG design features to the specific demands of the SDGs. Sustainability problems are "wicked" and interdependent, intensifying the need for cross-sector collaboration, transparent trade-off management, and legitimacy [1].

Evidence from sustainability collaborations indicates that governance and institutional design significantly influence environmental and social performance. Insights from the governance of inter-firm alliances suggest that the choice and combination of governance mechanisms affect the achievement of shared goals and innovation outcomes, indicating that effective governance design is crucial to collaborative performance, also in sustainability contexts [2].

Goal-setting approaches to sustainability also hinge on collaborative architectures that translate global targets into national commitments, indicators, and integrated policies. The SDGs' non-binding, goal-setting architecture increases the importance of the processes and arenas

through which actors interpret and implement global goals. Weak formal institutions at the intergovernmental level and a reliance on voluntary, bottom-up engagement shift much of the steering capacity to networks, partnerships, and collaborative arrangements among states, civil society, and the business sector. At the same time, the universal scope of the SDGs, which applies to all countries, multiplies the trade-offs and coordination needs that hierarchical regulation alone cannot address, thereby making collaborative governance mechanisms central to translating broad aspirations into concrete strategies and joint action for sustainability [19].

Biermann et al. [19] stress that SDG success depends on "formalizing commitments" and "indicator frameworks", while Wibawa & Nur'aini [20] note that balanced power and clear rules are prerequisites for joint decisions.

In addition, collaboration for sustainability often unfolds across multiple scales: vertical alignment to cascade SDG targets through national, regional, and local levels, and horizontal alignment to manage interlinkages and trade-offs among goals [19,22]. Work on the "black box" of collaboration for sustainable development points to the need for clear governance arrangements, transparency, and iterative evaluation to sustain joint action over time [21].

In summary, collaborative governance can be understood as translating into six specific modes of action, namely: public initiation, inclusion of non-state actors, deliberative participation, formalization, consensus orientation, and contribution to public policy. Together, these form a coherent whole that makes it possible to move from conceptualization to practical application, particularly with regard to the specific adaptation requirements associated with the SDGs. It also relies on processes of commitment, trust, shared understanding, communication, and reciprocity to produce joint decisions [23,25,28], thereby reinforcing the need for collaborative arrangements between entities and sectors. This implies an openness to the outside world, a willingness to compromise, and the assumption of commitments aimed at implementation and at achieving the broader goal of harmonious development.

Moreover, collaborative governance incorporates a cross-cutting idea of sustainability in order to translate broad ambitions into strategies and joint action. These elements are designed to integrate environmental, social, and economic objectives and to manage trade-offs in a transparent and legitimate manner [1,2,20]. However, they also require the formalization of commitments and indicator frameworks, as well as coordination needs that rigid hierarchies cannot address on their own.

The SDG framework further adds the need for vertical (national–regional–local) and horizontal (across goals) alignment across levels and sectors of governance. It also requires the creation of formal arenas conducive to debate and consensus-building, capable of converting participation into concrete, shared choices and into a distribution of duties and responsibilities (accountability) [17,19]. Evidence in sustainability research also suggests that collaboration can enhance legitimacy and environmental and social performance, but this depends on a clear institutional design, well-established and widely understood rules, and a stable formal commitment [1,2,20].

2. Methods

Taking stock of the literature review on CG and its key ingredients, this paper uses a qualitative approach to explore four initiatives related to sustainable development in Portugal. The methodological approach is qualitative because the topic still requires in-depth exploration and detailed examination, given the insufficient theoretical understanding of the subject under study. This approach helps obtain a holistic view of the analyzed contexts and establishes patterns within the study object [34]. This choice aligns with the theoretical framework, allowing a compelling interpretation of the phenomenon in relation to the theoretical assumptions used and the established patterns [35].

We will use a case study analysis of four initiatives related to sustainable development in Portugal to understand how decisions are made, implemented, and the outcomes that can be achieved. Case study research enables the exploration of one or more bounded systems over time through detailed and in-depth data collection using multiple sources of information. A case study may involve a group of individuals, a program, an event, or an activity. It should be selected based on its relevance to the research problem, as well as its ability to present different perspectives on the problem, process, and contexts [34,36].

The choice of a collective case study approach enables the illustration of the research problem by selecting multiple case studies and replicating the same procedures for each case. The main

advantage is that it provides more consistent evidence and, consequently, a more robust study [36].

The data collection techniques that may be used in the case studies include document analysis, allowing for a broad and flexible collection of information on the subject under study, providing more detailed and comprehensive explanations [34,36].

Content analysis will be applied for data processing, a technique that facilitates the identification and interpretation of written, verbal, or visual communication messages through systematic and objective procedures [37].

These four initiatives can help explore the potential of CG for implementing the SDGs. They were selected because they involve public and private actors and are formally organized. For this purpose, we analyzed the main documents produced by these initiatives, including legal diplomas and activity plans produced by these networks.

Based on the national voluntary reports [17,38], we first mapped SDG-related initiatives with a national remit and then purposively selected four cases that meet four inclusion criteria: i) formal constitution (law, decree, statutes); ii) multi-stakeholder composition (state and non-state actors); iii) a policy implementation/coordination remit beyond single projects; iv) sufficient documentation to enable like-for-like coding.

We analyzed publicly available policy and organizational documents produced between 2018 and 2024, including legal instruments (laws, decrees, and ministerial orders establishing mandates and decision-making rules), statutes/by-laws, strategic and annual plans, meeting minutes/communiqués, and monitoring/evaluation reports. Our codebook comprised criteria codes (public initiation, inclusion of non-state actors, participation in decision-making, formal organization, consensus orientation, policy contribution) and process codes (commitment, trust-building, shared understanding, communication routines, joint action/reciprocity).

The first initiative selected is the Alliance ODS Portugal, a multi-stakeholder network aimed at raising awareness, informing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the Business Sector's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals [39].

The National Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development (CNADS) was the second initiative selected, considering its role in promoting sustainable development. Although it was created before the emergence of the 2030 Agenda in 1997, one of its main areas of work is the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals [40].

We also considered the Municipal Platform for the Sustainable Development Goals (ODSlocal), an initiative to mobilize municipalities to achieve the SDGs. ODSlocal encourages the participatory and collaborative construction of municipal agendas with goals related to the 2030 Agenda [41].

Finally, we considered the collaborative processes established for the preparation of the National Voluntary Reports, which are interesting tools for monitoring the implementation of the SDGs in Portugal. These processes follow an inter-institutional coordination process [17,38].

Portugal played an active role in drafting and implementing the 2030 Agenda [42]. At that time, it advocated for adopting more measures related to peace, security, and good governance, greater promotion and protection of the oceans, and the integration of a strong Human Rights dimension and the fight against inequalities [38].

Portugal has advocated creating a system based on cooperation and complementarity among the relevant actors, exploring synergies and interdependencies at the global, regional, and national levels [38].

Since then, two national voluntary reports on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development have been prepared, involving civil society, businesses, and representatives of various stakeholders. The reports aimed to monitor the implementation of the SDGs and reflect on the main challenges of sustainable development in Portugal.

According to the performance index of the 193 United Nations member states, Portugal ranks 18th, with a score of about 80% in achieving the SDGs. Portugal has advanced more than the European average in most of the SDGs, having invested in areas such as inclusion, renewable energy, air quality, recycling, and water. However, it still needs to make efforts to improve its performance in economic issues due to low productivity, low wages, and weak economic performance [17].

3. Results

In this section, we aim to understand how CG can contribute to the achievement of the SDGs by examining its implementation in the Portuguese context and assessing its alignment with the criteria and processes of CG.

3.1. Collaborative Governance Criteria

In attempting to identify whether these initiatives meet the requirements of CG (Table 2), we found that only CNADS meets all the criteria to be considered a Collaborative Governance arrangement. Indeed, we observed that it is the only one initiated by public organizations, including private and civil society actors, primarily from civil associations, companies, academia, and municipalities. Additionally, CNADS is formally organized, and its decisions are made by consensus, as evidenced by its mission to "facilitate the participation of various social, cultural, and economic forces in the pursuit of consensus regarding environmental policy" [40]. Finally, CNADS contributes to public policies by issuing opinions and recommendations and monitoring national and international policies. Notably, this advisory body is the only one studied that still needs to be created to oversee the SDGs and is highly focused on environmental policy.

We found no evidence that decisions in the National Voluntary Reports are made by consensus during their preparation or that any institution holds more significant influence or decision-making power.

The other initiatives studied (Alliance ODS Portugal and Plataforma ODSlocal), created by groups linked to academia and the business sector, need to meet the first criterion of Collaborative Governance, as public organizations did not initiate them.

In Table 2, we systematize the criteria of Collaborative Governance and verify their correspondence with the sustainable development initiatives analyzed.

Table 2. Collaborative governance criteria by initiative.

Initiatives Criteria	CNADS	Alliance ODS Portugal	ODSLocal	National Voluntary Reports
Dialogue initiated by public organizations	Yes Created by decree-law	No Civil society and academic origin	No Civil-society and academic origin	Yes Created by decree-law
Inclusion of private actors and civil society	Yes State, academia, and civil society	Yes Academia and civil society	Yes Academia	Yes State and civil society
Participation in the decision-making process	Advisory decisions with voting processes	Consultative with no decision forum defined	Platform participation with no decision forum defined	Coordination and deliberative group with no decision-forum defined
Formally organized and meet collectively	Council with defined organs, plenary, and working groups	Association statutes with meetings	Platform governance with meetings	Interministerial structures with meetings
Decisions by consensus	Yes Decisions by consensus	Not explicit	Not explicit	Not explicit
Contribution to public policies or public management	Issues recommendations and plans of implementation	Advocacy and awareness with indirect intervention	Local monitoring and guidance	Reports on SDG implementation and plans of implementation

Source: Authors' elaboration.

3.2. Collaborative Governance Process

In this section, we present initiatives developed in Portugal from the perspective of the SGDs that can contribute to strengthening the CG process. These initiatives suggest different approaches that can be implemented to structure a CG process. We analyze the CG process considering three different aspects previously identified in the literature review, namely: i) predefined conditions for collaboration, ii) development of collaboration, and iii) perceived impacts of collaboration (Table 3).

Table 3. Collaborative governance process and its link to sustainable development initiatives.

Predefined Conditions for Collaboration	Development of Collaboration	Perceived Impacts of Collaboration
• Need to implement the SDGs • Increase sense of ownership and co-responsibility • SDG 17 "Partnerships for the Goals"	Focus groups with regional and local stakeholders	A positive vision on achieving the goals of CG

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Regarding the predefined conditions for collaboration related to the SDGs, we find that incentives for participation and the general environment for the implementation of the SDGs [23] are among the main aspects observed, as concerns about collaboration are linked to the need to implement the SDGs and increase the sense of ownership and co-responsibility for them [20].

Another factor related to the predefined conditions for collaboration that can serve as an incentive for participation and the general environment is SDG 17 "Partnerships for the Goals", which establishes that one of the main objectives of Sustainable Development should be the existence of collaboration mechanisms between organizations [1,22]. This goal can incentivize participation because efforts to achieve the SDGs must be based on collaboration.

Regarding the development of collaboration, we highlight two activities that can increase commitment, communication, and shared understanding of the process [23]. These were carried out as part of the second national voluntary report: the 2030 Agenda Town Hall Tour and focus groups with regional and local stakeholders. These two initiatives sought to approach the regional and local levels, involving academia, businesses, non-governmental organizations, municipalities, and regional coordination and development commissions.

Finally, regarding the perceived impacts of collaboration, there is a general perception that CG mechanisms have been crucial in ensuring adequate monitoring and coordination of the 2030 Agenda in Portugal [20], showing a positive vision of achieving the goals of CG [30].

4. Discussion

CG processes can provide unique opportunities to implement sustainable development practices in public administration by involving relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes. However, such implementation depends on establishing environments of trust and commitment, as well as dialogue, interaction, and the institutional capacities of the invited stakeholders [10].

The criterion least met by sustainable development initiatives in Portugal is consensus decision-making, which only exists in the National Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development. According to Booher (2004) [43], consensus-building plays a significant role in CG, enabling joint dialogue to solve public policy problems.

The somewhat unexpected finding is that CNADS, not designed for the SDGs and primarily focused on environmental policy, nonetheless satisfies all core CG criteria. This runs counter to strands of the literature that assume SDG-branded collaborations will naturally instantiate collaborative governance; our evidence suggests that design features (public initiation, formal organization, and explicit consensus rules) rather than labels determine whether collaboration materializes as joint decisions [2,28].

The preparation of national voluntary reports is nearing a collaborative governance arrangement, which enhances the establishment of environments of trust and commitment for developing sustainable development commitments [10]. No evidence was found that decisions are made by consensus. This factor is relevant because CG aims to achieve consensus [28]. The Alliance ODS Portugal and the ODSLocal initiative were initiated by organizations linked to academia and civil society and do not meet this criterion.

Regarding the CG process, we found that the main predefined conditions for collaboration in the initiatives developed in Portugal include incentives for participation and the general environment, particularly through the following aspects: i) the need to implement the SDGs; ii) increasing the sense of ownership and co-responsibility for the SDGs; iii) SDG 17 "Partnerships for the Goals". These aspects facilitate cooperation among the various parties involved, helping to create the necessary conditions for collaboration [28].

The initiatives developed in Portugal have focused on aspects such as commitment to the process, shared understanding, and communication to develop collaboration. Focus groups with regional stakeholders have contributed to this effort. When organizations develop processes of

mutual understanding, it becomes easier to achieve the perceived impacts of collaboration [30]. However, other aspects related to the development of cooperation, such as trust and resource sharing, could still be further addressed.

Regarding the perceived impacts of collaboration, there is an optimistic view regarding the achievement of collaboration goals, promoting the perception of collaborative advantage that these initiatives can result in [31].

However, there is still a way to go to increase the perception of the impacts of collaboration, such as organizational learning, the alignment of national policies with the SDGs, and the increase in interactions [29]. The second national voluntary report indicates this by highlighting the need to increase the involvement of multiple public and civil society actors [17].

This greater involvement of stakeholders will work better if the criteria of CG are considered, namely by creating collaborative arrangements initiated by public organizations that, given the fulfillment of SDG 17, allow for significant participation in decision-making and consensus-building, thereby preserving a real contribution to public policies.

Our comparative evidence shows that when formalization and an explicit consensus rule are absent, participation remains consultative and trade-offs stay implicit; when these elements are present, as in the CNADS case, authority and legitimacy to negotiate sustainability trade-offs are clearer, and outcomes can be connected to public policy. Across cases, the weakest links are the formalization of decision rules and consensus provisions; without them, communication and consultation do not translate into collective choices. This finding aligns with the literature that emphasizes design features as prerequisites for collaborative advantage [1,2,23,25,28,31].

Process dynamics also matter: preconditions (e.g., incentives, ownership of the SDGs), development (e.g., commitment, trust-building, communication routines, resource sharing), and perceived impacts are unevenly evidenced in the documents. Where commitment and shared understanding are present, but resource sharing and trust routines are missing, coordination and learning on SDGs remain limited. These process gaps reflect design gaps: without formal decision and consensus rules, actors have fewer incentives to invest in trust or reciprocity, and accountability for trade-off choices is weak. Absent these aspects, SDG initiatives risk remaining platforms for dialogue without the capacity to make or enforce integrated choices. Strengthening both design and process is thus necessary to move from consultation to joint decision-making on sustainability.

A current opportunity to explore the potential of collaborative governance and incorporate the SDGs concerns metagovernance. With metagovernance, it will be easier to have formal decision-making and consensus-building processes and to contribute more effectively to public policies. Metagovernance can be generally defined as a coordinated governance process in which a set of legitimized actors facilitates and directs according to established rules, procedures, and standards in a fragmented context with a high degree of autonomy of networks and organizations [44,45]. The State and Public Administration can act as metagovernors and have the capacity to define problems and the conditions of decision-making processes, determine which stakeholders to involve, allocate resources, and decide how relationships with actors outside the public sphere should be managed, particularly regarding the sharing of power and responsibilities [46–48].

By mapping needs and problems in a specific complex context, metagovernance can help to understand the complexities inherent in sustainable development processes and contribute to greater adaptability to different contexts. At the same time, it offers a broad and global perspective on problems and their best solutions, tools, processes, and actors' roles. Metagovernance can also support open innovation practices and knowledge sharing, which are essential for incorporating sustainable development principles into organizational practices [49–52]. Applied to the SDG gaps observed here, metagovernance would combine network forums (e.g., stakeholder platforms) with a legal mandate and a codified consensus-seeking rule within SDG coordination bodies; switch temporarily to hierarchical tasking for time-critical targets to ensure delivery without abandoning collaboration; and maintain the arrangement by protecting against capture, resourcing joint work, and auditing adherence to the consensus procedure [52].

Because we rely on publicly available documents, some collaborative practices may not be visible, and written rules may give the appearance of stronger collaboration than it actually is in practice. To reduce these risks, we used several types of documents for each case, kept a clear record of coding decisions, followed a simple criteria-and-process checklist, and based our ratings

only on clear evidence (e.g., laws, activity plans, minutes). These findings should be read as guidance for similar contexts, not as statistics for the whole system.

5. Conclusions

CG processes can be beneficial in various public contexts, particularly for implementing sustainable development practices. This is a current and relevant topic for Public Administration, especially with the emergence of the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. The contribution of the study relies on the application of an integrated criteria–process assessment to SDG-related initiatives, which is less commonly done in the literature and thus strengthens academic novelty.

In the selected initiatives that can contribute to achieving the SDGs, which already involve multiple actors and are formally institutionalized, we found that only CNADS meets the requirements of CG, with no initiative explicitly created for the implementation of the SDGs that meets all collaborative criteria. We observed that these initiatives are often not initiated by public actors or need organized mechanisms to allow for effective participation in the decision-making process and achieving consensus. Our results go against the idea that collaborations for SDGs are automatically good examples of CG. What really matters is the design, with clear written steps to seek consensus and a public authority that officially starts and instigates the initiative. When these are missing, even broad participation doesn't lead to joint, policy-relevant decisions.

Regarding collaborative governance processes, we identified some favorable elements for collaboration creation, development, and impacts. Despite this, it will be essential to increase the impacts of collaboration so that those involved can perceive that the monitoring and coordination of the 2030 Agenda in Portugal brings several benefits and that it should be complemented by greater organizational learning, alignment of national policies with the SDGs, and greater involvement of stakeholders in the agenda implementation processes.

Therefore, it is crucial to invest in a collaborative governance initiative that meets the requirements of collaborative governance, considering its role in the successful implementation of the SDGs.

It is suggested that elements of metagovernance be considered to explore the potential of collaborative governance and the incorporation of the SDGs. This is mainly to ensure that decision-making processes are based on consensus and regulated through structures that promote open innovation and knowledge sharing, essential for incorporating sustainable development principles into organizational practices.

A limitation of this study is the need for more detailed information collected through interviews or questionnaires, which would allow for a deeper exploration of the selected initiatives and the criteria and process of collaborative governance.

For future studies, more activities related to the SDGs should be analyzed, aiming to assess their potential contribution to collaborative initiatives and the establishment of collaborative governance processes in implementing the 2030 Agenda. A deeper analysis of these collaborative arrangements is also suggested to understand how they meet CG criteria and processes, particularly in relation to leadership roles and conflict-resolution mechanisms, in order to identify challenges and future opportunities for implementing the SDGs.

Data Availability

All data was collected from the websites of the initiatives studied (República Portuguesa [17,38]; Global Compact Network Portugal [39]; CNADS, 2023 [40]; ODSlocal, 2022 [41]).

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: S.S; Formal analysis: S.S.; Investigation: S.S.; Methodology: S.S.; Supervision: J.R.C., & A.M.N.; Writing – original draft: S.S., J.R.C., & A.M.N.; Writing – review & editing: S.S., J.R.C., & A.M.N.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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