



Understanding the Governing of Urban Commons: Reflecting on Five Key Features of Collaborative Governance in Zero Waste Lab, Amsterdam

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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 jubiquity press

ABSTRACT

Urban commons is presented as a challenge of collaborative governance. This study delivers a normative perspective to analyse and evaluate processes and outcomes of the governance of urban commons. It demonstrates the development and application of the perspective in action research on Amsterdam's Zero Waste Lab case, as a way to better understand successful and failing institutions in a concrete practice and to design interventions for improvement. Consequently, the (im)plausibility of collective action in urban communities and the participation of public actors present dilemmas for urban commons. The study specifically synthesises urban commons and collaborative governance scholarship and relates also in general to the transition towards co-creation in governing the city, e.g. in public administration or planning.

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KEYWORDS:

urban commons; collaborative
governance; circularity; waste
management; street markets;
Amsterdam

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Meerkkerk, J. (2024).
Understanding the Governing of
Urban Commons: Reflecting on
Five Key Features of Collaborative
Governance in Zero Waste
Lab, Amsterdam. *International
Journal of the Commons*, 18(1),
pp. 397–410. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.5334/ijc.1282](https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1282)

INTRODUCTION

Issues with waste dumping and littering triggered stallholders on Amsterdam's Plein '40–'45 street market to orchestrate a radical turnaround. To change the market from a place of nuisance and pollution into a pioneer in sustainability, they developed a circular waste management system through a plan called Zero Waste Lab (ZWL). To integrate the system, from waste separation at the stall to circular processing, these stallholders aspired collaboration with the municipality and other partners. Primarily, two stallholders (out of 150) initiated ZWL in collaboration with a place manager (PM) employed by the municipality. Already in the early stages of the initiative, I joined to support them through action research; soon, the group of participating stallholders grew larger.

This study conceives of ZWL as an initiative to collectively manage common resources by the community of stakeholders, i.e. as a commons (sec. [Bollier, 2014](#); [Kip et al., 2015](#), p. 13/16). It seeks to contribute to the recently emerging strand of research studying governing cities as a commons ([Foster & Iaione, 2019](#)), 'where practical solutions are implemented and tested to enable self-governance at a local level' ([Janssen, 2022](#), p. 244), such as related to energy provision ([Becker et al., 2017](#)), place development, neighbourhood regeneration and urban planning ([Coletti & Rabbiosi, 2021](#); [Felstead et al., 2019](#)) or managing touristification ([Romão et al., 2021](#)). This study draws on action research to further understand governing urban commons as collaborative governance, as proposed by Foster and Iaione ([2016](#)). I contribute to the literature that offers a 'co-cities protocol' that guides such ideas into practice ([Foster & Iaione, 2019](#), p. 239ff., 2022; [Iaione et al., 2018](#), p. 6ff.) by elaborating on the conceptual understanding of urban commons as collaborative governance through enabling analysis and evaluation of processes and outcomes (c.f. [Barnett et al., 2020](#)).

While Elinor Ostrom's ([1990](#)) understanding of institutions—i.e. shared rules, norms and strategies within and across communities that organise and structure actions ([Ostrom, 2007](#))—that enable successful and sustainable commons governance is a good starting point, it has been recognised that urban settings encompass different challenges than her cases, which predominantly concern rural communities managing natural resources ([Borch & Kornberger, 2015](#); [Dellenbaugh et al., 2015](#); [Foster & Iaione, 2016, 2019](#); [Garnett, 2012](#)). The nature of urban communities and the environments these community members live in require amendments to Ostrom's principles to arrange and secure inclusive participation in the development of institutions ([Meerkerk, 2024](#)). Additionally, I develop a collaborative governance approach to enable

applying Ostrom's design principles for commons institutions in the complexity of urban practices. In other words, this study argues to address challenges for commons of urban contexts through institutional arrangements that facilitate collaboration across the boundaries of spheres, sectors and organisations, through deliberative and consensus-oriented processes of collectively designing, determining and implementing public policies and management (sec. [Ansell & Gash, 2008](#); [Emerson et al., 2012](#)).

AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

This study results from action research, signifying the active participation in the studied practice as a co-owner that collaboratively designs its change ([Bradbury, 2015](#)). Action research for urban settings, as discussed by Meerkerk and Majoor ([2020](#)), aligns with the emergent nature of collaborative governance ([Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018](#)) associated with urban commons. It is a proven method to craft new institutions in contexts where Ostrom's design principles cannot be applied without adaptation or precautionary measures ([Sinner et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, action research offers opportunities to contribute to the transformative goals of ZWL ([Kemmis et al., 2014](#); [Stringer, 2014](#)) and developing an analytical perspective synchronically and dialectically ([Dick et al., 2009](#)). The subsequent interactive and iterative approach included gaining theoretical understanding of urban commons, assembling concepts as analytical perspectives on urban commons governance, applying perspectives in fieldwork and analysis and drawing lessons from application as feedback for fine-tuning. While readers may grasp the 'back-and-forth' of action research in the analysis section, to offer useful comprehensive insights, I present organic processes of overlapping and intersecting activities as a more static end result.

Research was mostly carried out through participating in involved stakeholders' daily practices, although sometimes I used more conventional semi-structured interview settings, particularly for extensive individual introductions with stakeholders to explore principal ideas, preferences and capacities concerning waste management and collaboration. As an action researcher, I contributed to stakeholder activities by offering analyses and interpretations to stimulate reflection and to offer interventions that spur collaborative governance. For example, during a discussion about self-organisation amongst stallholders, I identified that the lack of a clear definition of the collective (i.e. Ostrom's first principle), stood in the way of developing effective rules and measures. Offering this reflection, on the spot and on

subsequent occasions, as an explanation of the stagnation they experienced, spurred the stallholders to invest in community-building activities.

Empirical observations, including my own actions and interventions and the effects thereof, were documented in a reflexive logbook.¹ In this way, I created space for contributing to ZWL from my knowledge of commons, governance and public administration literature and extensive experience of working with political bureaucratic organisations and societal initiatives by explicitly recognising and describing how this expert knowledge can have a place in enabling urban commons through action research. The logbook was also used for reflections on applying the conceptual analytical perspective, for example by documenting reactions on specific terminology or the applicability of concepts. As such, I kept track of ideas and insights instrumental to the evolution of the analytical perspective. The result is presented in this paper.

As an entry point for my research, I teamed up with PM, who had a central and connecting position between ZWL stakeholders. We met weekly and frequently visited the market. I also accompanied PM in meetings with municipal colleagues and potential partners, and we co-organised a myriad of activities and interventions to establish and strengthen stakeholder collaboration. Subsequently, I participated more independently, for example by taking part in meetings between stallholders and other municipal representatives. PM and I intensively worked together with the two ZWL initiators and others that, in changing compositions, helped them with organising ZWL activities. Over time this group of assisting stallholders grew from three in the beginning to ten to fifteen in later phases. Through our visits to the market we regularly spoke shortly with about 50% of the approximately 150 stallholders in total, to stay informed on the general sentiment that lived on the market. The response to a survey we co-creatively organised was also about 50% of the total group. This percentage resembles the share of permanent stallholders on the market. The increasing interest and involvement in ZWL also reflected in the growing number of stallholders that participated in ZWL activities, that grew from about fifteen stallholders attending our first meeting to about fifty of them attending the official opening ceremony of ZWL in 2022.

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE FOR URBAN COMMONS

Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework (McGinnis, 2011; Ostrom, 2007) presents institutional development and functioning as action

situations shaped and triggered by contextual factors. Urban commons contexts differ from Ostrom's 'traditional' commons (Hess, 2008). Literature study teaches that, in relation to commons, urban contexts are characterised by large-scale, unfamiliar and anonymous, fluid and mobile, and diverse communities living in dense networked environments, where resource ownership is fragmented and dispersed and politics and regulation are dominant (Boydell & Searle, 2014; Clapp & Meyer, 2000; Foster & Iaione, 2016, 2019; Garnett, 2012; Kip, 2015; Kip et al., 2015; Kohn, 2004; Kornberger & Borch, 2015; Löw, 2015; Oakerson & Clifton, 2017; Parker & Johansson, 2012; Parker & Schmidt, 2017). This urban context complicates establishing the communicative relationships Ostrom (1990) deemed crucial for collective action in governing commons and which underlie the design principles for institutions she proposed (Meerkerk, 2024).

Urban contexts thus provoke specific requirements on institutional arrangements for collectively managing common resources (Foster & Iaione, 2016, 2019; Kip et al., 2015; Kornberger & Borch, 2015; Parker & Johansson, 2012). In part, these are 'constitutional' challenges (see McGinnis, 2011, p. 173; Ostrom, 2007, p. 24) in arranging the conditions for participation of stakeholders in collective-choice processes (Meerkerk, 2024). Also needed, and the subject of this study, is to rethink what the actual collective management of urban common resources looks like and how to establish it. This working of the action situation is presented in the IAD Framework as patterns of interaction that lead to outcomes, which are normatively valued by evaluative criteria (McGinnis, 2011, p. 173). Hence, an analytical perspective to understand urban commons institutions includes a set of normative criteria to evaluate institutional processes and outcomes given its specific ambitions. Such criteria may serve the understanding and development of institutions for urban commons in addition to the lessons Ostrom provided, for example in guidance of bringing her design principles into practice in urban contexts.

To identify such normative criteria, I elaborate on Foster and Iaione's (2016, p. 335) conceptualisation of urban commons as a modus of collaborative governance. This governance aims to achieve 'collaboration across formal governance arrangements toward social and economic inclusion' and includes direct stakeholders and governmental actors (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 336). As such, collaborative governance alludes to democratic impulses of co-creation and advocates social agendas of emancipation, empowerment and fighting inequality (c.f. Nightingale, 2019), but also to the conceptual understanding of governing open-access, potentially rivalrous urban resources.

DEFINING AND ELABORATING COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE FOR URBAN COMMONS

Foster and Iaione (2016, para. III) envision co-design spaces where stakeholders come together for collective goal formulation and practical realisation under jointly agreed definitions and division and sharing of roles and responsibilities. They incite governmental actors to abandon their fortresses and assume new roles in public policymaking as collaborative process facilitators (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 337/340). The authors explicitly stress public authorities sharing responsibility with an active citizenry to co-govern the city in search of pooling knowledge, capacities, resources and mandate (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 341/343). In using collaborative governance to configure the collective management of common resources, Foster and Iaione agree with Emerson et al. (2012, p. 2) to present collaborative governance as 'processes and structures of public policy decision-making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose' and embroider on the normative interpretation of Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 544/548) to engage stakeholders in a 'collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative.'

In this trail I present five features of collaborative governance as the criteria that institutions for urban commons must meet. Firstly, actions are instantiations of **collaboration across boundaries**. Typically, common resources in the city are used by a broad spectrum of actors that operate in different spheres, sectors or organisations (Parker & Johansson, 2012). These actors may include (active) citizens, businesses and entrepreneurs, civil society, cultural and public organisations, knowledge institutions and governments (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 331). Governance should connect such actors in joint, coordinated actions.

As a second feature, such actions must be **deliberative and consensus-oriented**. Recognising the interdependency between autonomous actors in using non-excludable but subtractive resources (see Ostrom, 2005, 2010), urban commons follows the logic of opening up communicative relationships to overcome the correlating coordination problem (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 324/325). Collaboration in this meaning transcends mere boundary crossing. Rather, collaboration typifies the process in terms of deliberation towards mutual, shared understanding and engagement amongst participating actors (Doberstein, 2016, p. 822; Emerson et al., 2012, p. 10/16) who are focussed on (not necessarily achieving) consensus (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 546/547).

Thirdly, consensus-oriented processes are instrumental to **collective creation, decision-making and implementation**.

Importantly, collaborative governance should exceed consultation as a formal environment that embraces deliberation as that which substantially contributes to decisions (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 546). It should enable stakeholders to collectively undertake integrally intertwined processes where policies are designed, decisions made and practices developed. Collaborative governance emphasises horizontality to overcome power differences to enable using complementarity amongst stakeholders (Foster & Iaione, 2016, pp. 329/332, 341/343) and to facilitate the context sensitivity that is intrinsic to the commons (Ostrom, 1990, p. 90). Foster and Iaione (2016, p. 336/337) acknowledge limitations for collaborative governance in the formal role and ultimate say on decisions of public authorities in the public sphere (Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 546), particularly in the highly politicised, regulated urban context (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 238/239; Parker & Schmidt, 2017, p. 206/207). Therefore they advocate to reposition governmental actors to facilitate deliberative processes by offering support and expertise, safeguarding democratic legitimacy through inclusivity and accessibility, and securing coherency and consistency across autonomous arrangements in a shared environment.

Plausibility of collaborative processes requires **engaging stakeholders constructively** as a fourth feature of collaborative governance. Actors need access to and capability in co-governing processes. While Foster and Iaione (2016, p. 340/341) deem facilitating the least powerful to accommodate social and economic inclusion essential for urban commons, the urban context also more generally implies challenges to overcome mutual unintelligibility and misunderstanding, dis cohesion, power imbalances and incoherency within the community of stakeholders (Meerkerk, 2024). Building constructive engagement depends on developing shared problem definitions and objectives; it also requires a basic level of trust, understanding, experienced legitimacy and commitment within the community. In addition, constructive engagement requires capacities within the community to put such motivations into actions (Emerson et al., 2012, p. 10/17).

Finally, collaborative governance is **public** (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). As an alternative to state regulation and privatisation, urban commons is directed at responsibly managing a common resource by stakeholders through collectively coordinating provision and appropriation, but the central aim of urban commons is to preserve open access (Foster & Iaione, 2016, p. 334/335). Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 545/547) and Emerson et al. (2012, p. 2) describe two separate manifestations of this public character. Firstly, collaborative governance is aimed at a public purpose, i.e. to produce public policies, services or goods. Secondly, the generative processes of collaborative governance are public affairs. Again, this point finds recognition in Foster and

Iaione's plea for rethinking the role of public authorities. Set in the highly politicised and regulated urban context, but also because of the inherently contested nature of urban resources and urban space (Parker & Schmidt, 2017, p. 206/209), Foster and Iaione view public actors as crucial participants in governing urban commons.

ZERO WASTE LAB

ZWL is an initiative for circular waste management of Plein '40-'45 street market's stallholders, to deal with waste and littering problems that, ironically, came with the market's increasing success. In preceding years, a group of stallholders recognised this neglected square's potential and transformed the market from nearly deserted into one of Amsterdam's busiest markets. The stallholders cater to low-income consumers: local residents or outside visitors. Unfortunately, as a result of the market's increased success, at the end of the day, rubbish, plastic bags and packaging were left scattered all over the square and the surrounding area. Moreover, some stallholders regularly left waste behind on the square or dumped it illegally in containers intended for neighbourhood residents.

In 2018, some stallholders felt compelled to account for their surroundings. Two of them initiated ZWL to create a circular waste management system. They feared that continued nuisances (and resident complaints) would spur the municipality to introduce undesirable regulation and measures or even eliminate the market altogether. Stallholders also saw promotional potential in becoming a market with circular waste management, had intrinsic motivation to become more sustainable and were convinced that practical experience-based waste management would be most effective. They sought to develop a logistic infrastructure to facilitate waste stream separation at the stall, to be collected at a central point and then distributed to different locations for circular processing, such as bio gas installations, paper and plastic recyclers or re-users of plastic crates or wooden pallets. These ideas were endorsed by the borough's PM. His task was specifically defined to solve current issues on the square by building coalitions of stakeholders and collaborating on solutions. Building coalitions was partly also preparatory for future regeneration of the square. Through this task, PM offered stallholders support to develop and execute their ZWL plan.

ZWL was also motivated financially: waste would become raw material for value creation. In early 2019, this motivation was further prompted when the central municipal service organisation for street markets, the Markets Bureau (MB), implemented new regulations to counter waste dumping and littering (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2019b). The policy

would relieve stallholders of the responsibility to arrange provisions through private contracts by a compulsory central service for waste disposal. Instead, stallholders had to pay a levy for waste disposal; in return, the municipality organised central collection and contracted an organisation for further distribution and processing.

The municipal service had some flaws. Firstly, the service was introduced without offering proper facilities, like transportation from the stalls to the collection point at a nearby courtyard, as well as the infrastructure to easily dispose it there. The result was a labour-intensive and heavy-duty process that resulted in a filthy courtyard. Secondly, it neglected the commercial and sustainability potential of separated waste streams and had everything collected together and taken to an incinerator. Finally, the levy was set according a standard tariff per surface area, irrespective the amount of waste a specific stallholder produced. Given significant differences in waste production, stallholders experienced the new system as unfair. Moreover, the municipal service thus failed to stimulate (potentially cost-decreasing) waste reduction.

Because ZWL was initiated and anticipated as collaboration between stallholders, the municipality and other partners, it was envisioned to unify separate plans and actions. This task was undertaken by PM. The support through action research thus focussed on how stakeholder actions might enable or impede ZWL as urban commons.

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING THE GOVERNING OF URBAN COMMONS

Analytically understanding ZWL as urban commons presents Plein '40-'45 as a common resource for diverse stakeholder needs: stallholders and other entrepreneurs exploit it as their business location; residents and visitors use it for shopping, leisure, culture and socialising; it is a public transport hub; and diverse public facilities have their home here. Poor waste management on the market impacted square appeal and convenience for other users (c.f. Oakerson & Clifton, 2017). Likewise, the actions of others, e.g., the establishment of new businesses or urban regeneration projects, affect the square's value for stallholders. Because actors are largely free to use the square for their own purposes, the coordination problem of interdependency between autonomous actors comes into play—characteristic for common resources (Ostrom, 2005, 2010). The urban commons then becomes constituted by using ZWL as a platform to overcome this coordination problem through **collective creation, decision-making and implementation** in a **collaboration across boundaries** of businesses, entrepreneurial collectives and municipal organisations.

At the outset, mid 2018, ZWL was the idea of two stallholders inspired by one individual employee of a costermonger who used waste for a small-scale recycling business. PM adopted the initiative to solve littering and waste problems through co-creation. His task was commissioned and legitimised drawing on the **public** character of the problem: it involved public space and had grown into a dispute between multiple stakeholders, including residents; the municipality had a rather large influence on and responsibility for street markets through regulation and service management. Additionally, improvements on the square were preparatory for upcoming regeneration of the area, which is a public purpose.

On the recommendation of PM I joined ZWL as an action researcher by the end of 2018. The initiating stallholders, PM and I agreed that my support would be dedicated to the collaboration between the various stakeholders, maintaining an objective and impartial position. Initially we identified various practical challenges to (collaboratively) realise ZWL: the small recycling practice did not offer logistic facilities for expansion; ZWL, particularly plastic-free entrepreneurship, required change and investments which stallholders were only willing to make if everyone complied; there was not yet any general support or compliance amongst this broad group of stallholders; tasks and responsibilities of the municipality were divided between different departments which largely operated independently of each other; the new policy made potential partners for circular waste processing dependent on contracts with MB, which was still acting independently of ZWL; finally, stallholder-MB relations were marked by past conflicts and mutual distrust, and MB preferred its own regulatory and coercive course over collaboration.

To open up an action perspective, I analysed the situation according to the features of collaborative governance. This analysis yielded a twofold approach: (1) building a collective amongst stallholders and (2) improving stallholder-municipality collaboration.

ZERO WASTE LAB AS A STALLHOLDER COLLECTIVE

PM focussed on supporting ZWL development as an entrepreneurial initiative, seeking association and collaboration with others along the way. He focussed on organising the logistic infrastructure and practical realisation to set a positive example that others could join. A fundamental challenge for initiators was convincing colleagues to adopt ZWL's ambitions. This challenge entailed establishing **collaboration across boundaries** between businesses. Prospects were dim: interpersonal relationships were superficial, and there was no strong sense of community, let alone organisation. Moreover, stallholders struggled to

survive and thus had little time or energy to address collective and public challenges like market image or sustainability. Also, stallholders were unwilling to make sustainability investments, e.g. expensive biodegradable bags, without universal stallholder compliance, due to expectations of free-riders and holdouts (Cohen, 1991): stallholders feared competitive disadvantages (i.e., higher costs and resulting need to charge higher prices) for the compliant; they were sensitive to non-investing colleagues unfairly profiting from the improved image of an (almost) plastic-free market; moreover, they thought ZWL would eventually fail unless everyone participated, thereby increasing the risk of initial investment. However, PM facilitated the initiating stallholders to kickstart ZWL on the market. Before the formal shift to central waste disposal services, he had already started dialogue with stallholders and organised the collection point, although provisionally, anticipating future investments. Two market janitors were temporarily employed to separate different streams of waste—e.g., cardboard and plastic crates—and made an inventory of sorts and volumes. They also helped clean up market litter and handed out materials such as garbage bags to stallholders. I noticed that these efforts, in addition to facilitating waste management, created awareness amongst a larger group of stallholders of the problem and ZWL as a solution, both of which became popular shoptalk topics. Interpreted as efforts to establish collaborative governance, PM and the initiating stallholders' way of working **constructively engaged** a broader group of stallholders by effectively opening up positive attitudes towards collaboration, enabling communication and coordination as **collaboration across** broader private stallholder organisational **boundaries**.

Capitalising on the increasing awareness, PM and I facilitated **deliberative, consensus-oriented** interaction to support further collaborative governance. We individually consulted stallholders on desires, needs and potential contributions, and we used our findings to organise group discussions. These activities triggered shared learning, supported joint ideation and stimulated a culture of addressing misbehaviour and celebrating success. For example, solutions to efficiently bring waste to the collection point and to decrease plastic bag use were copied from each other and became the basis for further developing general infrastructure. Also, stallholders agreed to clean stalls during the day with brooms provided by the janitors. In their group app, stallholders shared pictures of colleagues cleaning their stalls, thereby publicly singling out good actors; nevertheless, stallholders also confronted the bad actors who did not clean their stalls. By jointly reflecting on these group dynamics, I helped ZWL initiators to understand these group dynamics explicitly as building collaborative governance. Promoting inclusive

processes of **collective creation, decision-making and implementation** established and secured the experience of joint ownership. We realised a **deliberative, consensus-oriented** approach through surveys, intensive individual consultations and group meetings that gave stallholders the chance to contribute ideas and participate in prioritising decisions. Through these activities, the stallholders agreed on a prioritised list of action points as the collective agenda to discuss with the municipality. As a form of subsequent **constructive engagement**, stallholders were given opportunities to fulfil tasks, e.g. logistically realising the return of wooden pallets and plastic crates. Spurred by the growing sense of community, one stallholder started a business for collectively buying biodegradable bags, offering lower prices and promotional activities for all and thus providing a solution to free-riders and holdouts.

By the end of 2019, ZWL had successfully applied for a €90,000 subsidy from a community budgeting programme in which residents decide which projects to support (Municipality of Amsterdam, 2019a). During 2020, the subsidy was used to transform the collection point into a professional sorting station. The subsidy ‘reward’ warmly acknowledged the **public purpose** of ZWL and exemplifies the role of an enabling state through granting budgeting programs for societal initiatives. It encouraged stallholders to carry on, despite several frustrating experiences with some municipal processes (see below). Parallel to bringing the sorting station to fruition, stallholders continued improving market logistics, such as by introducing wheelie bins for costermongers to separate organic waste at their stalls. PM again facilitated this initiative, and the janitors offered operational support (e.g., handing out and collecting bins). The ZWL initiators reported that this support throughout the years has played a crucial role in motivation and success. These initiators finally got the impression that, rather than issuing them with top-down regulations, someone from the municipality was actually **listening and constructively engaging** them to work on solutions, demonstrating **collaboration across boundaries**. By January 2021, the sorting station was fully operational and in 2022 it was opened festively in a formal ceremony. Over 80% of total waste was collected separately, and waste and litter nuisances on the square were broadly seen as drastically reduced.

This analysis of the realisation of ZWL demonstrates the use of co-design spaces to establish effective collaborative governance for urban commons. Bringing together stallholders and facilitating **deliberative, consensus-oriented processes** to **collectively create, decide on and implement** solutions for a shared problem had the effect of overcoming coordination problems between (primarily business-driven) actors. However, the plausibility of **collaboration across boundaries** of private

organisations appeared dependent on achieving a positive attitude amongst stallholders. The enabling state was exemplified as PM inspired, stimulated and facilitated this by **constructively engaging** stallholders. Residents acknowledging ZWL’s **public purpose** opened the way for realisation; however, we will now also see the downside of that characterisation.

ZERO WASTE LAB AS COLLABORATION BETWEEN STALLHOLDERS AND MUNICIPALITY

Developing a market-based logistics infrastructure and action repertoire was interrelated with another process: coordination and collaboration with other stakeholders, the municipality in particular. ZWL was intended to complement and collaborate with the municipal waste management system. The common division of roles, tasks and responsibilities preceding ZWL made its benefit and success critically dependent on the municipality, which historically played a dominant role in regulating street markets as an economic activity exploiting **public space**. MB, for example, decrees an individual regulatory for each market that includes its composition and code of conduct. MB also executes street market management, service tasks and financial completion, such as coordinating the daily set-up and assigning stalls, monitoring and enforcing compliance, directing maintenance, collecting fees and levies and coordinating waste management. It commissioned Waste and Recycling (WR), another municipal organisation, to collect and process waste. More long-term and strategic street market responsibilities are appointed to the central department of Economic Affairs, which formulates policies that direct to future market commercial strategies, supplies repertoires for management and service tasks—for waste management this repertoire ranged from a fully municipal-led system to one in which stallholders arrange everything individually—and determines forms and sizes of fees. More indirectly involved departments include service organisations to maintain and clean public space and Public Space Surveillance and Enforcement that acts on problems (e.g., pollution, parking).

Marking Foster and Iaione’s suggestion of an enabling state, developing ZWL’s collaborative governance thus required altering public policy **creation, decision-making and implementation**: from a central, governmental and authority-based approach to set conditions and frameworks, to the integration of societal actors and their practices into the processes in which conditions and frameworks are developed, laid down and operationalised. Building the stallholder collective reflects the coordination problems on which Ostrom focussed—e.g. free-riders and holdouts (Ostrom, 1990, p. 27)—and works towards user-generated criteria for collaborative process outcomes (see

Ostrom, 1990, p. 92/94). But collective action also requires connecting actors, practices and processes in **collaboration across boundaries** between societal and entrepreneurial spheres and political and bureaucratic domains. Such collaboration describes how, in highly politicised and regulated urban environments (Foster & Iaione, 2019, p. 238/239), governmental recognition and nestedness of self-organisation (see Ostrom, 1990, p. 101/102) become part of co-creation processes (c.f. Nightingale, 2019).

By transforming waste management from an individual entrepreneurial responsibility to a municipal service, MB became a crucial partner for ZWL, arranging and assuming waste responsibility, from disposal to processing. While introducing the levy for waste disposal in March 2019 increased stallholder-MB tensions, the former were determined to seek collaboration and find a way to connect and synchronise processes and practices. PM functioned as a coordinating liaison; we jointly attempted to develop Foster and Iaione's co-design spaces by identifying the main obstacles for collaboration and creating interventions. We therefore had several meetings with an organisational adviser of MB, charged with exploring new waste management system possibilities for all Amsterdam street markets. Explaining his ambition to develop an integral approach, this adviser denominated the challenges: municipal departments involved in waste management on street markets did not fully understand each other's roles and tasks, and these departments worked within hierarchical structures with little opportunity to coordinate and exchange knowledge. When exploring possibilities to adjust waste collection and processing, PM had already experienced this organisation structure's inertia and unresponsiveness. For example, due to a lack of procedures and facilities, offering large volumes of waste repeatedly resulted in chaotic situations and filthiness across the courtyard. PM discussed this problem with WR, also informing WR about ZWL and the stallholders' idea to place waste compactors to diminish nuisance and accrued waste pollution and to decrease logistical movement, thus saving costs and making recycling more viable. Despite general enthusiasm, WR did not take further action. Later, WR's hesitance appeared due to being contractually commissioned by MB. It did not want to act, or even participate in discussions about solutions and strategic developments, unless required or requested by MB. From the perspective of collaborative governance, this rigid, compartmentalised and hierarchically structured organisation lacks the competences needed in **deliberative, consensus-oriented** processes of **collectively creating, deciding on and implementing** solutions. MB actually used its privileged position to decide on the implementation of alternative solutions, pre-empting deliberation by

diminishing practical prospects, and acted therefore opposite to **constructively engaging** stakeholders.

Urban commons entails configuring horizontal relationships between various ZWL stakeholders by sharing responsibilities to co-govern, as promoted by Foster & Iaione. Building a bilateral **deliberative, consensus-oriented** relationship with MB could be a pragmatic first step. To overcome the lack of confidence shaped by historical circumstance, I advised stallholders and PM to show a fundamentally positive attitude by maintaining an outreach and solution-oriented approach. In addition, I had personal reflective conversations with representatives of MB seeking to neutralise and mediate the relationship, as well as to change MB's action perspective and stimulate a collaborative attitude. Offering third-person reconstructions, for example, encouraged MB representatives to reflexively scrutinise situations, i.e. to critically investigate their own role and develop insight into how that role is shaped by the action repertoire they bring to the situation instead of merely valuing its application (c.f. Grin & Van De Graaf, 1996). Likewise, I offered insights into the potential benefits of ZWL as urban commons, such as the enhanced effectivity of user-generated, user-enforced rules, as found by Ostrom (2010).

Over time, recognition and appreciation amongst MB representatives grew, as they themselves articulated on several occasions. Nevertheless, the repeated requests and frequent advice of stallholders and PM were not accepted. Adopting a collaborative approach was difficult for MB for multiple reasons, its manager told me: the relatively new organisation was not functioning properly and had a weak position in the overall municipal organisation; waste management was a novel task with insufficient budget; escalating problems with the collection point created only short-term urgency. Moreover, past problems with corruption—an important reason for founding MB—had embedded suspicion regarding street markets within the municipal organisation, where, consequently, centralisation, control and enforcement were advocated to protect and serve **public interest**. These accumulating factors made MB turn to internal processes and triggered authoritative modes of communication and governance. MB intentionally refrained from features of collaborative governance like **constructively engaging** stallholders in **collective creation, decision-making and implementation** to maintain a sense of keeping the situation surveyable, comprehensible, manageable and controllable.

PM continued informing MB on the progress and plans of ZWL, but failed to establish a **deliberative, consensus-oriented** process aimed at building co-ownership; relations remained a communicative channel of informing without rules for **constructive engagement**. For instance, PM

complained that MB selectively copied and annexed elements of ZWL without further engaging stallholders; after months of escalation on the courtyard, the idea of waste compactors was finally picked up by MB and commissioned to WR, who then placed them without, however, consultation of stallholders and janitors. Consequently, the waste compactors that were placed were not particularly fit: the disposal lid was too high for the heavy loads of many stallholders; the container was not suitable for wet streams, which caused pollution by leakage; and the size and poor manoeuvrability enforced inconvenient placement, hindering other courtyard users and creating shady corners that, at night in particular, attracted sundry uninvited guests, such as drugs dealers and drunkards. The example illustrates how bureaucratic, compartmentalised, hierarchical governance complicates the integration and securement of local user knowledge throughout the different sequences—i.e., as a pooling strategy—and reduces the flexibility needed to take advantage of emerging opportunities. Moreover, it reinforces oppositional relationships.

This analysis' second part shows various difficulties regarding transitioning to collaborative governance. Creating **deliberative and consensus-oriented** processes as a basis for **collective creation, decision-making and implementation** was hindered by troubled interpersonal relationships between stallholders and municipal actors, then further impeded by organisational and procedural structures (c.f. Ansell & Gash, 2008, p. 547/548). Waste management was seen as a **public purpose**; this public character was translated into a governmental responsibility subject to conventional practices of responsible governmental organisations. Notwithstanding the constructive efforts of stallholders and PM, and my own attempts to establish more positive attitudes amongst MB representatives towards collaboration and sharing responsibilities in co-design spaces, the compartmentalised and hierarchical structure was preserved. Analytically, the activities of MB resulted in not **constructively engaging** stallholders in **collaboration across boundaries** of different spheres towards **collective creation, decision-making and implementation**, and thereby prevented ZWL from succeeding.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper analysed ZWL according to the features of collaborative governance for urban commons. It brings forward normative interpretations of interactions between stakeholders and the outcomes thereof. Thereby, this paper explains the contributing and impeding qualities of relations, actions and rules in terms of enabling collective

management of the common resource Plein '40-'45. In the analysis, we recognise how collaborative governance enables to apply Ostrom's (1990, p. 90) design principles for commons institutions in the complexity of urban contexts. For example, this analysis shows that Ostrom's clear boundaries were established through the forming of a community by meeting cross-boundary collaboration challenges between private businesses and by provoking deliberation about Plein '40-'45 as a shared resource in need of joint care. The work of PM to achieve collaboration across boundaries between entrepreneurial sphere and political/bureaucratic domain was also necessary to create a nested enterprise in which local infrastructure and logistics become integrated in overarching systems. Recognition of ZWL's public good through the attribution of a community budgeting subsidy contributed to the municipality acknowledging the initiative as a purposeful self-organisation and to working towards this collaborative nested enterprise. Such collaborative efforts showed, in success and failures, that constructively engaging stakeholders through deliberative and consensus-oriented processes was key to user-generated rules suiting the local ZWL context, for example regarding the developing of infrastructure and logistics on the market and the waste collection point. Moreover, establishing collaborative governance spurred the sense of community, shared ownership and clarity of rules that formed a growing culture of mutual correction in which stallholders used a self-managed app group to monitor each other's (non) compliance with ZWL and to publicly sanction infringers (and, likewise, reward achievers).

The analysis illustrates the roles of individual features, but—aligning findings and recommendations from a recent literature study by Barnett et al. (2020, p. 382)—it is the interplay between those features that exposes the dynamics of realising urban commons. By highlighting and applying this coherence, this study delivers an integrative multidimensional normative perspective on assessing 'measures of successful processes' and 'indicators for good governance or management practices' (Barnett et al., 2020, p. 379). For example, entrepreneurial collaboration across boundaries of individual businesses was possible because all were given voice in creating and deciding on ZWL. However, without PM constructively engaging stallholders and the financial acknowledgement of ZWL's public character, entrepreneurial collaboration would not have been productive at all. On the other hand, the analysis also showed MB's adoption of ZWL solutions not establishing collaboration across boundaries, as essential features were lacking: conventional compartmentalised and hierarchical governance inhibited deliberative and consensus-oriented processes to collectively create, decide on and implement this solution.

These insights contribute to what Sinner et al. (2022, p. 10) describe as ‘a new theoretical agenda that reorients inquiry to practical issues of crafting institutions (...) and a new methodological agenda—action research as a way of recognizing and working through complexity rather than abstracting from it.’ This study contributes by identifying required interrelated features, referred to by Sinner et al. as ‘design principles’, and presenting those features within an action research approach (see also Meerkerk & Majoor, 2020) as an embedded way of working on academic development and practical change simultaneously and interactively. This approach informs crafting institutions for governing urban commons in and accounting for particular contexts of individual cases. I also contend that the analytical perspective can be an inspirational instrument to creatively reveal and interpret institutional dynamics in other disciplines (e.g. Healey, 2012; Michels, 2011; Nabatchi, 2010) that study ways of co-creatively governing the city (Ansell et al., 2021). Further research in various fields and contexts should test this hypothesis.

In addition to illustrating the utility of the analytical perspective, the analysis provides an ambiguous image of a practice in which collaborative governance is simultaneously furthered and impeded. The examples stress the role of agency by identifying the features of collaborative governance as the fruitful objects of actions, such as facilitating deliberation and encouraging positive attitudes towards collaboration by PM. In terms of agency, the role of action research becomes particularly evident in the researcher offering mediation by being a third party that establishes such processes of interaction and motivation toward collaboration. This role aligns with Ostrom’s sixth principle on access to conflict mediation and resolution mechanisms.

DILEMMAS OF URBAN COMMONS

Through analysing ZWL, some dilemmas of urban commons come to the surface. I describe a few of these dilemmas below, which should be understood as topics and invitations for future research, recognising the shortcomings of a single case study and the preliminary nature of conclusions.

Are urban communities suitable for commoning?

ZWL exposes challenges for collective action in ways similar to Ostrom’s findings, such as overcoming coordination problems with free-riders and holdouts amongst stallholders concerning sustainability investments. Given these doubts, establishing communicative relationships was instrumental in building a clearly defined collective that allows for mutual agreements. Comparable were interpersonal relationship issues, such as conflicts and distrust between stallholders and MB inherited from previous interactions (see McGinnis, 2011, p. 175/176;

Ostrom, 2007, p. 43). Mediation and reflexivity improved these relations as part of building collaborative capacity, and facilitating consensus-oriented deliberative process stimulated co-ownership over ZWL, although not in entirely satisfactory ways.

The necessity of opening up communicative relationships introduces the first urban commons dilemma: given the natural inclination of urban contexts to complicate communicative relationships, is collective action a reasonable resort? Ostrom (1990, 2010) demonstrated, for example, that the coordination problem of the prisoner’s dilemma is constituted by assuming actors to be incapable to communicate with each other. In real-life situations, however, this issue can be dealt with by facilitating communication. While improving communication may be an effective strategy in cases of rather homogenous, closed and fixed communities, diverse and fluid urban communities appear to be more challenging. Such circumstances are partly an argument in favour of collaborative governance, precisely because it allows acknowledging and respecting diversity by incorporating different perceptions, expectations and requirements into the design of policies. However, practically urban contexts may overly complicate or even outright inhibit deliberation. Obviously, what is and is not possible depends on context and agency, but it is important to keep such considerations in mind when engaging in concrete practices.

Can public actors be part of commoning?

The complexity of opening up deliberation amidst urban diversity was particularly complicated due to interfering rule systems of participants in cross-boundary collaboration. The inherent diversity of the urban (Kip et al., 2015, p. 12; Kornberger & Borch, 2015, pp. 6, 12; Löw, 2015, p. 113/115) engenders a community of users that exploit common resources for different kinds of purposes and in different ways (Parker & Johansson, 2012, pp. 8, 15/18), but it also assembles users from different spheres, sectors and organisations with related diverging conventions and rules (Kornberger & Borch, 2015, p. 11/12; Parker & Johansson, 2012, p. 19). ZWL demonstrates significant problems for urban commons emerging when the subsequent distinct repertoires of thinking and doing conflict, particularly when rules-in-use (see Ostrom, 2007, p. 36/39) within factions contrast the merits of collaborative governance. Attempts to constitute a deliberative and consensus-oriented process aimed at collective creation, decision-making and implementation were impeded by MB holding on to internal rules of the municipal organisation that dictated a compartmentalised process executed via a hierarchical command-and-control structure.

This conclusion also shows an underlying dilemma: frequently, governmental organisations participating in collaborative governance show strong elements

of traditional public administration and managerial governance perspectives (Van der Steen et al., 2018). The establishment of deliberative, consensus-oriented processes towards collective creation, decision-making and implementation then becomes impeded internally. Awareness of this potential internal impediment of governing urban commons is helpful to clarify and understand frustrations in occurring cases and to focus attention to constructive interventions. For example, revising expectations of the formal character of collective creation, decision-making and implementation can open up a less radical, more incremental and pragmatic strategy to the realisation of urban commons. Articulating, as Foster and Iaione argue, the need for repositioning public actors as facilitators of co-design spaces as a vehicle to share responsibilities and mandate may help. A more fundamental yet at the same time radical necessity might be to alter internal processes of governmental organisations to match the nature of collaborative governance. Again, context and agency matter for the degree in which this dilemma may be handled productively. Further research may shed light on different manifestations of this problem for urban commons and investigating strategies for intervention.

Are urban public purposes apt for commoning?

The case-specific issue of MB's participation becomes a more general dilemma when considering urban environments to be highly politicised and regulated (Foster & Iaione, 2019, p. 238/239). The confining role of MB in ZWL was indeed confirmed and enforced by the appropriation of street market management as a governmental task: MB is expected to play a provisional coordinative role through facilitating Plein '40-'45 as place for a street market and assigning access to individual stallholders to make use of such a common resource. This dominant position of public authorities to mediate between different kinds of appropriators is common in dealing with the highly contested nature of shared resources in urban environments (Parker & Schmidt, 2017, p. 206/209). Foster and Iaione's enabling state recognises the crucial role this position plays in securing the non-excludability of common resources in urban contexts. Governments are proposed to secure inclusivity through mediating and constructively assembling the rivaling claims of multiple stakeholders whose equal rights to the resource (c.f. Harvey, 2012; Kip et al., 2015) do not match the stakeholders' often unequal capacities to effectuate that claim (Foster & Iaione, 2016). Acknowledging the inherent public character as a feature of collaborative governance, urban commons thus remarkably suggest the enclosure of common resources under governmental regulation to protect against enclosure under one or the other form of privatisation, in order to

open up possibilities for collective action (e.g. collaborative management) under the facilitation of governmental intervention (Boydell & Searle, 2014; Clapp & Meyer, 2000; c.f. Foster & Iaione, 2016, para. II.C).

A final dilemma elaborates on whether public authorities can be expected to become facilitators of collective action, recognising their responsibility towards public issues in a representative democracy. Understanding urban commons as inherently public introduces governments as inevitable stakeholders, but political responsibility apparently contradicts sharing responsibility and mandate in collective processes of creation, decision-making and implementation of public policies. Instead, political responsibility triggers the utilisation of this powerful position to push through centralised regulation. This observation does not necessarily lead to deeming urban commons impossible. Rather, it should be understood first and foremost as a reminder of the challenging character of the transition towards co-creatively governing the city and the perseverance, creativity and profound understanding of complexity required. Hopefully, I contribute to this creativity and understanding of complexity with the analytical perspective devised in this study. Second, the observed contradiction indicates a more fundamental question as to whether and how the mandate over public issues, i.e., the institutionalisation of democracy, can or should be organised differently such as to intrinsically recognise common resources as to be governed through collaborative governance, e.g., as a hybrid of representative and participative democracy. Acknowledging the important role of public authorities to protect common resources against enclosure and to preserve the commonness of those resources immediately illustrates the difficulty of delivering adequate answers.

NOTE

1. In accordance with the guideline of the Dutch HBO-raad (Commissie Gedragcode Praktijkgericht Onderzoek in het hbo, 2010), data can be requested in anonymised form via the author.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the stakeholders on Plein '40-'45 for allowing me to become part of their world and in particular to Redouan Boussaid, Abdelhakim Amarki and Mustapha Daoudi. Thank you to prof. dr. John Grin, dr. Julie Ferguson and prof. dr. Stan Majoor for their support and advice. Also I want to express my sincere appreciation to the anonymous reviewers who have substantially contributed to improving the argument and clarity of my article. And I would like to thank SIA-raak and Interreg Europe for funding the research on which this study is based.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The research project is funded by a four year SIA-RAAK grant (National Taskforce for Applied Research). The case study of Plein '40–'45 is also funded by Interreg Europe.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X16671369>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Meerkerk, J. (2024). Understanding the Governing of Urban Commons: Reflecting on Five Key Features of Collaborative Governance in Zero Waste Lab, Amsterdam. *International Journal of the Commons*, 18(1), pp. 397–410. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1282>

Submitted: 06 April 2023 **Accepted:** 26 April 2024 **Published:** 28 May 2024

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