THE COLLABORATIVE LIFE CYCLE

A JOURNEY FROM START-UP TO RENEWAL (OR DECLINE)

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ABSTRACT

This brief presents a life-cycle framework describing how collaboratives evolve through start-up, building, sustaining, renewal, and/or decline stages. Although development is dynamic and rarely linear, each stage has distinct priorities, challenges, and capacity needs. Understanding these stages can help practitioners and funders better align strategies, resources, expectations, and measures of success with a collaborative's developmental journey. By providing a shared language for assessment and action, the framework can strengthen collaborative effectiveness, resilience, sustainability, and long-term impact.

INTRODUCTION

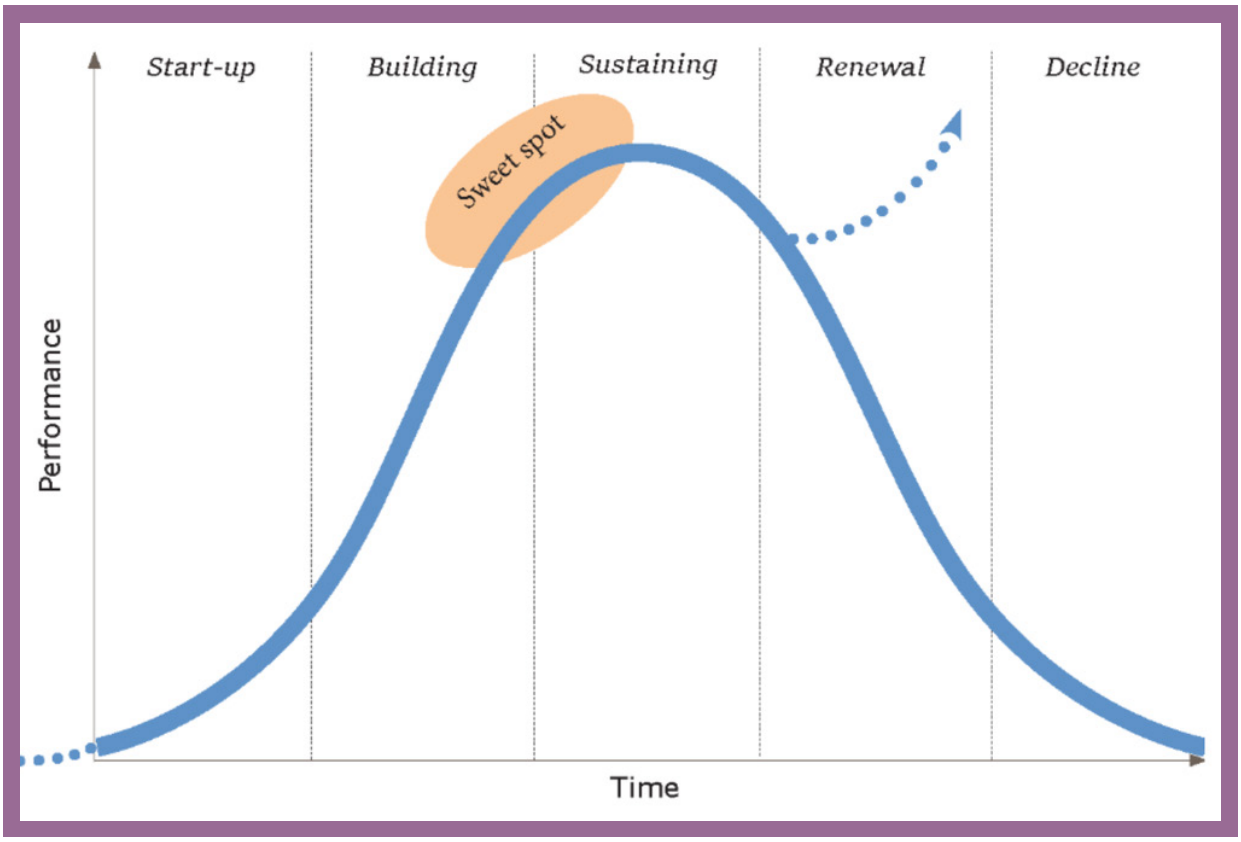
Because landscapes and seascapes are shaped by interconnected ecological and social systems, their stewardship often requires collaboration among multiple parties. As a result, collaborative approaches are becoming a defining feature of landscape stewardship—the practice of conserving, restoring, and stewarding landscapes and seascapes at scale.

In this brief, we assert that collaboratives are distinct organizational models that, like any traditional organization, evolve through a series of developmental stages. Typically, they form during an initial start-up stage, grow through a building stage, mature into a sustaining stage, and eventually transition to a renewal or decline/retirement stage. Collaboratives face different opportunities, challenges, and priorities at each life cycle stage, and their capacity needs vary by stage.

EVOLUTION OF COLLABORATIVES

Used as an umbrella term, "collaboratives" represents a suite of organizations engaged in collective action to achieve shared goals—for example, partnerships, coalitions, alliances, and networks. Much like traditional organizations in for-profit, non-profit, and government sectors, collaboratives progress through a series of stages (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Collaborative Life Cycle Stages[1]



Before formally entering the start-up stage, potential partners often engage in an *exploration and discovery* phase (represented as blue dotted line before start-up). This phase involves speculative conversations, informal assessments, or shared projects to explore mutual interests, emerging opportunities, and readiness to enter into collaboration. These activities help potential partners determine whether a formal collaborative is worth pursuing. The decision to join forces may unfold gradually over several years as relationships grow organically, or more quickly in response to new opportunities, shifting conditions, or urgent needs.

This phase typically precedes a start-up stage which is followed by building, sustaining, renewal, and/or decline stages. It is worth underscoring that a collaborative's evolution is dynamic and not always linear. Collaboratives may move back and forth between stages or experience overlapping stages. They might accelerate or stall along the curve in response to changing conditions or needs. Time spent in each stage varies widely and is influenced by available resources, clarity of purpose, internal relationships, and external factors.

[1] Collaborative performance (reflected on the y-axis) refers to both the group's functioning (how) and their outcomes (what).

Key characteristics of each life cycle stage are described below and followed by Table 1 that includes more detailed descriptions, and key activities and considerations for each stage.

Start-Up (Forming). The start-up stage is characterized by the collaborative's emergence and formation. Partners typically come together around a shared vision or common purpose, often in response to a pressing issue or opportunity. The focus is on laying the groundwork for joint action and developing foundational relationships and structures.

Building Stage. The building stage involves strengthening, testing, adapting, and formalizing functions and processes. The group moves beyond initial agreements and focuses on implementing systems and strategies to achieve its goals. This is a period of active implementation and refinement of governance structures, decision-making, and collective approaches and priorities. Towards the end of this stage (and into the sustaining stage) is often where collaboratives find their performance sweet spot (Figure 1).[2]

Sustaining Stage. The sustaining stage is defined by stability and demonstrated effectiveness. The group has established strong systems, a shared identity, and a proven ability to deliver impact over time. It focuses on operationalizing functions and processes to achieve its goals.

Renewal (or Transition) Stage. The renewal stage occurs when a collaborative recognizes the need to significantly adapt some aspect(s) of its work to remain relevant and effective. It is marked by reflection, reassessment, and strategic renewal, often in response to changing internal and/or external needs, drivers, or relationship dynamics. As part of the renewal process, the group will often reenter the life cycle at the start-up and/or early building stages.

Decline (or Retirement) Stage. The decline/retirement stage occurs when a collaborative has achieved its objectives or its energy, resources, and/or alignment diminish to the point that it is difficult to sustain meaningful collective action. This may result from waning participation, unclear direction, or loss of supporting structures.

[2] The "sweet spot" in the collaborative life cycle is where collective purpose, trust, and structured processes intersect to enable maximum performance, quality, and innovation. It is the inflection point where the collaborative moves beyond relationship building to achieving significant, tangible outcomes and impacts.

Table 1. Considerations & Key Activities for Each Life Cycle Stage

START-UP STAGE	
Description: Focus is on formation around a shared vision or pressing issue. Building relationships, clarifying purpose, and establishing foundational structures are central activities. **Considerations:** No fixed timeline; may take months or years. Common challenges include building trust, clarifying value, and ensuring partner alignment. Collaboration with Tribal partners may require distinct approaches and resources.	**Key Activities:** • Identify need for collaboration and initial set of partners • Build trust through shared work and social connection • Help potential partners garner organizational and leadership support and commitment • Define collective goals and outcomes • Explore governance structures and decision-making processes • Secure seed funding and other resources • Begin to formalize communication and coordination • Lay groundwork for collaborative and inclusive culture
BUILDING STAGE	
Description: Focus is on strengthening, testing, adapting, and formalizing functions, processes, and systems. It is a period of active implementation and refinement of governance, decision-making, and collective priorities. **Considerations:** Builds on start-up foundations and often requires revisiting early assumptions/ideas. Relationship and infrastructure building are accelerated. Synchronized activities and resources provide opportunities to test and refine goals, governance, and processes as membership grows.	**Key Activities:** • Formalize governance and shared decision-making • Clarify roles, develop accountability and coordination mechanisms • Launch joint or pilot initiatives • Expand membership and partnerships • Ask who is missing and ensure inclusive participation • Develop diversified and sustainable funding strategies • Establish internal communications and convening approaches • Refine priorities and shared norms

SUSTAINING STAGE

Description:
Focus is on stability, effectiveness, and measurable impact as well as operationalizing functions and processes for optimal performance. Systems and shared identity are well established.

Considerations:
Emphasis shifts to execution, resilience, leadership succession, long-term sustainability, and adaptation. Institutionalizing infrastructure within partner organizations is critical for longevity.

Key Activities:
- Scale impact, maintain momentum, and demonstrate track record
- Secure durable funding to help ensure long-term resilience
- Institutionalize partnerships and practices
- Integrate collaborative approaches into existing systems
- Adapt to internal and external change
- Maintain continuous improvement
- Embed inclusive norms into practices, policies, and effective onboarding procedures

RENEWAL STAGE

Description:
Focus is on reassessing and adapting to remain relevant and effective. Marked by reflection, reassessment, and strategic renewal in response to changing needs, drivers, or relationship dynamics. It may reenter earlier life cycle stages.

Considerations:
Renewal may involve restructuring, merging, or concluding work. The process should be deliberate and strategic, potentially leading to revitalization or thoughtful dissolution.

Key Activities:
- Revisit vision, value proposition, and shared goals
- Conduct assessments to understand emerging needs
- Redesign governance, membership, or operating structures
- Introduce new strategies, priorities, or ways of working
- Strengthen or rebuild partner relationships
- Explore new funding models or partnerships

DECLINE STAGE

Description:
Occurs when energy, alignment, and/or resources diminish, or objectives have been achieved, making sustained collective action difficult.

Considerations:
Decline does not always mean dissolution. Collaboratives may sunset their work, stabilize, or transition. Closure should be intentional, respectful, and include knowledge transfer and celebration of accomplishments.

Key Activities:
- Manage reduced engagement and leadership participation
- Address unclear goals or roles
- Navigate funding shortages or resource constraints
- Address fragmented relationships or competing priorities
- Coordinate knowledge transfer and closure (if dissolving)

COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY NEEDS

Capacity needs are not static; they evolve as a collaborative progresses through its life cycle. For example, emerging collaboratives may focus on defining a collective purpose, developing a shared strategy, and establishing inclusive norms. More mature collaboratives may prioritize setting up and sustaining durable systems and effective governance structures to ensure work on-the-ground is impactful. Recognizing these changing needs can help collaboratives and funders target capacity-building efforts more effectively. The *Collaborative Life Cycle and Capacity Assessment* worksheet (see Appendix) is a tool that can be used to help identify a collaborative's life cycle stage and assess its capacity strengths and gaps.

RELEVANCE FOR THE FIELD OF PRACTICE

Understanding where a collaborative is in its life cycle—and recognizing that its development is dynamic, iterative, and rarely linear—helps partners navigate inevitable challenges and transitions. Normalizing change, adaptation, and periods of recalibration enable practitioners and funders to view shifts in momentum, participation, or outcomes not as signs of failure, but as expected aspects of collaborative development.

A life-cycle perspective also provides a shared framework for aligning expectations, strategies, and investments with a collaborative's evolving needs. It can strengthen financial planning and fundraising by clarifying the types and levels of resources required at each stage—from seed funding and capacity-building support in the early stages to diversified, stable investments that sustain long-term impact.

Importantly, recent evaluation findings[3] indicate that aligning capacity and resources with a collaborative's life cycle stage is not only operationally valuable but also directly linked to outcomes. Investments in stage-appropriate capacities—such as coordination, governance, systems, and shared strategy—help collaboratives function more effectively and increase the pace and scale of on-the-ground results.

Finally, life-cycle framing provides a practical bridge between theory and application. It complements widely used tools and frameworks—including collaborative design elements (i.e., purpose, structure, composition, functions, and processes), as well as capacity assessments—helping practitioners translate broad concepts into concrete actions, priorities, and investments appropriate to each stage of development.

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[3] Mickel, A. E., & Farrell, S. D. (2025). Investing in collaborative models and their capacities: An evaluation of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Innovative Nutrient and Sediment Reduction Grants Program. Prepared for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.
Mickel, A. E. (2026). Positioning collaboratives to generate impact: An evaluation of the Catalyst Fund and collaborative capacity investments. Prepared for the Network for Landscape Conservation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLABORATIVES

For collaboratives, applying a life-cycle perspective can help:

- Anticipate stage-specific challenges and opportunities, enabling leadership teams to better understand and navigate issues that commonly arise at different points in a collaborative's development.
- Align strategies, structures, and investments with developmental realities, improving decision-making and reducing misalignment between ambition and capacity.
- Prioritize capacity-building efforts by focusing on the coordination, systems, governance, leadership, and fundraising needs most critical for current-stage success.
- Allocate resources more effectively by directing limited time, funding, and staff toward the activities with the greatest potential for impact.
- Enhance collaborative effectiveness by identifying strengths to leverage and gaps that could constrain progress or impact.
- Support successful transitions between stages by preparing for growth, adaptation, or transformation.
- Reduce the risk of common pitfalls through early recognition and proactive response to stage-specific challenges.
- Promote long-term sustainability and resilience by planning intentionally for evolution, continuity, and renewal.

This perspective is especially valuable for practitioners working across diverse landscapes and contexts. Early-stage collaboratives can prioritize trust-building, alignment, and the development of a shared purpose, while more mature collaboratives can focus on scaling, systems integration, and adaptive management. Matching strategies and investments to a collaborative's readiness can help prevent overextension, temper unrealistic expectations, and avoid underinvestment in the foundational capacities needed for long-term success.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUNDERS

For funders, understanding a collaborative's life-cycle stage enables more strategic and effective investment by helping them:

- Align funding strategies with developmental needs by tailoring investments to stage-specific priorities and capacities.
- Improve resource allocation by directing support where it has the greatest potential for impact.
- Set realistic expectations for outcomes by recognizing that collaboratives may be focused on relationship-building, planning, implementation, scaling, or sustaining impact, depending on their stage.

- Strengthen assessment and evaluation practices by using stage-appropriate indicators of progress and success rather than applying uniform metrics.
- Identify high-value capacity-building opportunities, particularly in areas such as coordination, systems, governance, and leadership.
- Reduce investment risk by anticipating and proactively addressing common stage-related challenges and barriers to success.
- Support long-term sustainability through investments in durable systems, infrastructure, and capacities appropriate to each stage.
- Improve funder–collaborative relationships by fostering shared understanding of timelines, expectations, and developmental needs.
- Enhance portfolio management by comparing collaboratives at similar stages and developing differentiated funding approaches that reflect varying levels of readiness, capacity, and impact.

A life-cycle perspective also supports more meaningful measurement and evaluation. It allows funders and practitioners to move beyond uniform metrics and assess both tangible outcomes and the critical enabling conditions that make those outcomes possible. These conditions—including the strength of relationships, the effectiveness of collaborative processes, and overall collaborative health—are essential to long-term success but are often overlooked or inadequately measured.

CLOSING REMARKS

Recognizing collaboratives as distinct organizational models with their own developmental journeys has important implications for landscape stewardship and conservation. Collaboratives are often viewed simply as collections of partner organizations rather than as entities with a shared strategic focus that require intentional design, investment, and capacity to function effectively. Consequently, the resources needed to support their development are frequently underestimated or expected to be absorbed by participating organizations.

Evidence from practice and evaluation shows that adequately resourced collaboratives can progress through life cycle stages and generate a wide range of interconnected impacts. These include foundational impacts such as increased trust and connectivity; operational improvements such as innovation and resource sharing; and long-term, system-level changes, including the institutionalization of collaborative practices and shifts in behavior across organizations and communities (Mickel & Farrell, 2025)[4].

[4] Mickel, A. E., & Farrell, S. D. (2025). Do more, better, together: Investing in collaborative work to make a difference. https://calandscapestewardshipnetwork.org/do-more-better-together

At the field level, collaboratives often serve as hubs for coordination, knowledge exchange, and innovation. They enable partners to work across organizational and geographic boundaries, draw on and leverage diverse forms of expertise, and scale solutions to complex socio-ecological challenges. When supported with stage-appropriate capacity, collaboratives can accelerate outcomes, improve efficiency, and produce solutions that are more durable and adaptable than those achieved by individual organizations working alone.

Taken together, a collaborative life-cycle perspective offers a shared language and practical framework that strengthens alignment among practitioners, funders, and the broader field. By encouraging more intentional development, strategic investment, and adaptive management, it increases the likelihood that collaborative efforts will achieve meaningful, sustained, and large-scale impact.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Mickel, A. E., & Farrell, S. D. (2026). The collaborative life cycle: A journey from start-up to renewal (or decline).

This work aligns with Collaborating Well's guiding principles and was developed to enrich its well of resources. To learn more about Collaborating Well™, visit https://stewardshipnetwork.org/projects/collaborating-well/

APPENDIX: Collaborative Life Cycle and Capacity Assessment

Purpose

This assessment is designed to help collaboratives:

- Identify their current life cycle stage
- Build shared understanding among partners
- Assess stage-appropriate capacity strengths and gaps
- Prioritize investments, supports, and next steps

The assessment is intended for **reflection, learning,** and **alignment,** not compliance. It works best when used collaboratively by partners, backbone staff, or facilitators.

How to Use the Assessment

- Start with the *Life-Cycle Stage Rubric* to identify your primary stage.
- Use the *Life Cycle Worksheet* to reflect and build alignment.
- Complete the *Stage-Specific Capacity Assessment* for your current (or emerging) stage.
- Use results to guide planning, funding, and capacity-building decisions.

Note: Collaboratives may show characteristics of more than one stage, especially during transitions.

PART 1: Collaborative Life-Cycle Stage Rubric

Use the rubric below to determine which life cycle stage best describes your collaborative at this time. Read across each row and select the column that most closely reflects your current reality.

	Start-Up	Building	Sustaining	Renewal	Decline
Collective Purpose & Goals	Purpose and goals are emerging and still being clarified	Purpose and goals are clearly defined and guide joint work	Purpose and goals are stable, shared, and embedded	Purpose and goals are being reassessed or refreshed	Purpose and goals are unclear, contested, or no longer motivating
Coordination Capacity (note: each stage includes ongoing coordination, convening & facilitation)	Coordination focuses on convening and facilitation	Coordination supports project management; systems and processes development, and accountability	Coordination supports operationalizing functions; systems and processes, and longterm strategy and learning	Coordination supports reflection and change	Coordination capacity is strained or unstable
Governance & Decision-Making	Governance is informal or emerging	Governance structures and agreements are formalized and used	Governance supports shared leadership; agreements and authorities are operationalized	Governance and structures are reassessed and redesigned	Governance is unclear or inactive
Shared Strategy & Priorities	Strategy is exploratory	Strategy is translated into priorities and work plans	Strategy supports sustained impact and is integrated into partner's plans	Strategy is being reimagined	Strategy is outdated or absent

	Start-Up	Building	Sustaining	Renewal	Decline
Systems & Infrastructure	Systems are minimal or ad hoc	Systems support coordination, priority-setting, and reporting	Systems are durable, integrated, and scalable	Systems adapt to support learning and transition	Systems are weak or underused
Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools	Foundational collaborative skills are emerging; norms and culture are still forming	Collaborative skills and inclusive culture guides shared ways of working; collaborative competencies are enhanced and adopted among partners	Collaborative leadership skills and culture are embedded and reinforced over time	Adaptive leadership, learning, and change-management skills are being strengthened	Collaborative skills and culture have eroded or are inconsistently practiced
Inclusive Culture (Including Belongingness)	Inclusion and belonging are emerging priorities; participation is broadening and inclusive norms are forming	Inclusion and belonging are intentionally embedded in decision-making; diverse partners have meaningful voice	Inclusion and belonging are foundational to culture and leadership; partners feel valued and influential	Inclusion and belonging practices are being reassessed and strengthened to ensure shared influence	Inclusion and belonging are inconsistent; participation may be tokenized and voice concentrated among a few

	Start-Up	Building	Sustaining	Renewal	Decline
Meaningful Relationships	Relationships are forming and norms of mutual respect & reciprocity are being established	Relationships are grounded in respect & reciprocity and support coordinated action across partners	Deeply respectful relationships, reciprocity, and mutual accountability sustain long-term collaboration	Relationships are being rebuilt with attention to restoring respect and shared commitment	Relationships lack mutual respect; dynamics may feel transactional, strained, or fragmented
Collaborative Mindset	Partners are seeing the value of collaboration and shifting toward shared ownership and joint action	Partners demonstrate shared ownership and prioritize collective goals over organizational self-interest	Partners share a strong collective identity and sense of ownership in the collaborative; and decision-making reflects a strong collaborative mindset	Adaptive and collaborative leadership are emphasized to navigate change and reinvention	Individual organizational interests are prioritized over collective purpose and goals
Partner Engagement & Trust	Trust-building is a primary focus; engagement is centered on a core group	Trust is established; engagement is active and expanding	High levels of trust and sustained commitment among partners	Engagement fluctuates as partners reconsider alignment	Engagement is declining; participation is inconsistent
Operational Functioning of the Collaborative	Operations are informal and largely relationship-driven; processes are still forming	Core operational processes (planning, coordination, reporting) function reliably	Operations are efficient, well-integrated, and support sustained work	Operations are being adapted or redesigned to support new directions	Operations are inconsistent, strained, or no longer support the work

	Start-Up	Building	Sustaining	Renewal	Decline
Projects and Programs	Early signs of progress such as improved coordination or pilot activity	Tangible early outcomes or improvements are visible in practice	Consistent, measurable improvements are evident at the community or system level	New or redefined impacts are emerging as strategies shift	Impact is limited, stalled, or no longer visible on the ground
Evidence of Impact	Early alignment and readiness	Initial results are visible	Sustained outcomes are demonstrated	New outcomes are being explored	Impact is unclear or declining

Rubric Interpretation - The column with the strongest overall alignment indicates your primary life cycle stage. Alignment across two adjacent stages suggests a transition. Alignment with renewal and decline often signals an inflection point

PART 2: Life Cycle Reflection Worksheet

Use this worksheet individually or as a group. Differences in responses are valuable and should prompt dialogue.

Section A: Identifying Our Stage

Primary life cycle stage today:

□ Start-Up □ Building □ Sustaining □ Renewal □ Decline

Evidence or examples supporting this assessment:

Are we experiencing elements of another stage?

Section B: Capacity Snapshot[5]

Which capacities feel strongest right now?

Structural Elements	**Binding Elements & Others**
• Coordination capacity • Collective purpose and goals • Shared strategy and priorities • Governance and decision-making structures • Collaborative practices, skills, and tools	• Inclusive culture • Meaningful relationships • Collaborative mindset • Others

Which capacities are limiting our progress and why?

[5] These capacity-building elements are described in this paper: deSilva, S., Farrell, S., & Knoblock, G. (2022). Increasing collaborative capacity and infrastructure for landscape stewardship [White paper]. California Landscape Stewardship Network.

Section C: Looking Ahead

What life cycle stage are we seeking to move toward next?

What would success look like in that stage?

What decisions, investments, or support are most critical in the next 6–12 months?

Which partner(s) can lead and/or support this movement?

PART 3: Stage-Specific Capacity Assessments

Use the assessment for your current or emerging stage. Rate each statement using the scale below.

Rating Scale

1 = Not in place
2 = Minimally in place
3 = Partially in place
4 = Mostly in place
5 = Fully in place and effective
N/A = Not applicable

Start-Up Stage Capacity Assessment

Coordination Capacity

___ Backbone or administrative support exists to convene partners and manage meetings
___ Facilitation supports trust-building and shared understanding
___ Communications and basic coordination are handled consistently

Collective Purpose and Goals

___ Individual and shared interests are understood
___ A shared vision, values, and purpose are explored and drafted
___ Desired shared activities and outcomes are described and understood
___ Collaborative agreements (e.g., MOUs, charters) are developing

Shared Strategy and Priorities

___ Early strategic priorities are identified
___ Partners understand their roles and contributions

Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools

___ Basic understanding of collaborative leadership skills are shared
___ Norms for communication and participation are established

Building Stage Capacity Assessment

Coordination Capacity

___ Coordination supports project management, engagement, and progress tracking
___ Backbone roles are clearly defined and resourced
___ Fiscal administration needs are identified and pursued
___ Coordination, facilitation, and convening capacities are ongoing and adequately resourced

Collective Purpose and Goals

___ A shared vision, values, purpose, goals, and functions are articulated.

Governance and Decision-Making Structures

___ Initial agreements (charter, MOU, etc.) are prepared and signed
___ Leadership teams and/or working groups are active
___ Decision-making processes are clear and used consistently

Shared Strategy and Priorities

___ Strategic plans or roadmaps are under development to guide collective work
___ Near-term priorities are identified and adopted
___ Agreed-upon accountability practices support progress toward shared goals

Systems and Infrastructure

___ Communication, reporting, and data-sharing systems support coordination
___ Initial physical infrastructure needs are identified and pursued

Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools

___ Partners have access to collaborative skill development and training
___ A culture of accountability is emerging

Sustaining Stage Capacity Assessment

Coordination Capacity

___ Coordination supports long-term strategy, learning, and scale
___ Backbone capacity is stable and sustainable
___ Coordination, facilitation, and convening capacities are ongoing and adequately resourced

Governance and Decision-Making Structures

___ Governance supports shared leadership
___ Leadership succession is planned for
___ The necessary agreements and authorities exist to accomplish priorities

Systems and Infrastructure

___ Data and learning systems inform priorities & decisions
___ Infrastructure efficiently supports collaborative functioning and scale

Shared Strategy and Priorities

___ Strategy supports long-term outcomes and adaptive management
___ Partners remain aligned

Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools

___ Continuous learning and innovation are embedded

Renewal Stage Capacity Assessment

Coordination Capacity

___ Coordination supports reflection and realignment
___ Facilitation enables difficult conversations and adaptation
___ Coordination, facilitation, and convening capacities are ongoing and adequately resourced

Shared Strategy and Priorities

___ Strategy is being refreshed collaboratively
___ New directions are explored

Governance and Decision-Making Structures

___ Governance can adapt to new priorities
___ Decision-making authority is clear during transition

Systems and Infrastructure

___ Systems support feedback, learning, and innovation

Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools

___ Adaptive leadership and change management training is provided and skills are present

Collective Purpose and Goals

___ A shared vision and purpose are renewed
___ Desired impacts are understood and agreed upon
___ Existing agreements (e.g., MOUs, charters) are revised or retired

Decline Stage Capacity Assessment

Coordination Capacity

___ Coordination supports honest reflection and transition conversations
___ Backbone or administrative support manages transition or closure

Governance and Decision-Making Structures

___ Clear authority exists for transition or closure decisions

Systems and Infrastructure

___ Documentation and reporting systems capture lessons learned
___ Knowledge transfer processes are in place

Shared Strategy and Priorities

___ Shared understanding exists about next steps

Collaborative Practices, Skills, and Tools

___ Conflict navigation and sense-making skills are present

Cross-Cutting Capacity Areas (binding elements)

The following three cross-cutting capacities (or enabling elements) apply across all life cycle stages and should be assessed regardless of stage. The items within each capacity area are designed to be thought-provoking. If there are other items that better align with your collaborative's purpose and goals, feel free to revise or add.

Rate each statement using the scale below.

1 = Not in place
2 = Minimally in place
3 = Partially in place
4 = Mostly in place
5 = Fully in place and effective
N/A = Not applicable

Inclusive Culture

___ Inclusion and belonging are intentionally embedded in participation and decision-making
___ Diverse partners have meaningful voice and influence in shaping outcomes
___ Participation is broad and not tokenized; influence is not concentrated among a few

Meaningful Relationships

___ The collaborative grows and supports a culture of reciprocity that builds trust, connection, cultural awareness, and mutual respect
___ Relationships enable facilitation of best practices, behaviors, and mutual accountability
___ Long-term success is supported through sustained attention to collaborative infrastructure, culture, leadership, and shared problem-solving

Collaborative Mindset

___ Partners demonstrate collaborative leadership and shared ownership of outcomes
___ The collaborative demonstrates and communicates successes and lessons showing how collaborative efforts lead to on-the-ground environmental, social, and economic outcomes
___ Partners identify strongly with the collaborative and see themselves as stewards of its shared mission
___ Collective goals consistently take precedence over individual organizational interests in decision-making

Partners should score these cross-cutting capacities using the same 1–5 scale before completing the stage-specific assessment below.

PART 4: Guided Scoring and Interpretation

This section provides a clear and partner-friendly way to use scores to generate insight and action. Scores are not intended to label or judge a collaborative. They are tools to surface patterns, prompt dialogue, and guide investment decisions.

Step 1: Identify Your Primary Life-Cycle Stage

Using the Life-Cycle Stage Rubric:

- For each row (dimension), place a "1" in the column that best reflects your current reality.
- Add the totals for each stage.

Stage Score Summary

Stage	Total Score
Start-Up	
Building	
Sustaining	
Renewal	
Decline	

How to Interpret Stage Scores

- The highest score indicates your primary life-cycle stage.
- Two close scores suggest you are in a transition between stages.
- High Renewal and Decline scores together may indicate a pivotal moment requiring intentional choice.
- Use this result to determine which stage-specific capacity assessment to prioritize.

Step 2: Score Stage-Specific Capacities

Complete the capacity assessment for your primary (or emerging) life cycle stage.
After scoring each statement:

- Calculate averages by capacity area using the life cycle stage tab for your collaborative (e.g. start up, etc.) in this worksheet. Guidance is provided in the instructions tab.
- Identify which areas fall below 3.5. [Note: please download the worksheet to your computer before entering data]

Lower scores typically indicate:

- Structural gaps (governance, systems, coordination)
- Skill gaps (leadership, facilitation, adaptive capacity)
- Alignment gaps (shared strategy, clarity of roles)

Using Results

- Identify lower-scoring capacities (e.g., below 3.5) as priority gaps
- Align capacity-building efforts with your life-cycle stage
- Use results to inform strategic planning, funding, or technical assistance
- Revisit the assessment during major transitions or annually

This assessment is intended to support intentional, stage-appropriate collaboration and capacity investment across the full life cycle. Scores are meant to highlight patterns and gaps, not to produce a single "right answer," and are designed to prompt reflection and dialogue.

Step 3: Score Cross-Cutting Capacities

Rate each statement in the Inclusive Culture, Meaningful Relationships, and Collaborative Mindset sections using the 1–5 scale:

1 = Not in place
2 = Minimally in place
3 = Partially in place
4 = Mostly in place
5 = Fully in place and effective

Calculate the average for each of the three cross-cutting capacities.

Cross-Cutting Capacity Score Guide

4 – 5.0 = Embedded strength and cultural asset

3 – 4.4 = Functional but could be deepened

2 – 3.4 = Capacity gap that may limit impact

Below 2.5 = Priority area for investment

These capacities influence success across all life cycle stages.

Similar to the stage-specific capacities, those below 3.5 could be viewed as priority gaps.