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Collaborative Governance in the United Nations Development System: Challenges and Opportunities in a Resource-Limited Fragile State

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Refereed Article

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Abstract

Fragile resource-limited states pose complex governance challenges that demand collaboration across international organizations, national authorities, and civil society. This study examines how collaborative governance operates in such contexts through three UN Joint Programmes in The Gambia, a setting marked by limited donor presence and systemic fragility. Using the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework, the research analyzes collaboration across three dimensions: efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation. Findings show that CG in fragile states is viable but dependent on three interlinked elements: shared vision, alignment of mandates, and accountability for results. The study extends CG theory by bridging the gap between abstract models and practice in resource-constrained environments, highlighting how collaboration adapts under weak institutions, limited capacity, and donor-driven incentives. At the same time, fragile contexts can foster unique opportunities: physical proximity among actors, smaller system scale, and strong community engagement can enable closer coordination, shared learning, and more responsive programme design. By integrating empirical evidence with theoretical insights, this study contributes to refining collaborative governance frameworks for fragile states and offers timely lessons for advancing child welfare and public administration in the post-2030 agenda.

Keywords : collaborative governance, fragile states, UN Joint Programmes, CGR framework, child welfare

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1. Introduction

Fragile resource-limited states pose complex governance challenges that demand collaboration across international organizations, national authorities, and civil society (Brinkerhoff, 2007; OECD, 2018). Fragility¹ undermines the ability of governments to deliver on national and international commitments such as the National Development Plan (NDP), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and other international commitment such as United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) among others. In such environments, fragmented institutions, limited fiscal capacity, and political volatility combine to make governance both urgent and more challenging. Children and youth are disproportionately affected by these deficits, facing systemic exclusion from decision-making as well as restricted access to basic services.

The governance challenges of fragile contexts have increasingly been approached through the lens of collaborative governance, which has emerged as a prominent approach for addressing “wicked problems” that cross organizational boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Emerson et al., 2012). Collaborative governance emphasizes joint decision-making, shared responsibility, and inter-organizational trust, offering a potential response to the constraints of fragmented authority in fragile states. Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) conceptualize these arrangements as Collaborative Governance Regimes (CGRs), dynamic systems of interaction characterized by drivers, collaborative dynamics, and performance outcomes. While the framework has been widely applied in studies of environmental management, urban planning, health, among others, it has been less examined in the context of fragile states, where the institutional environment may alter both incentives for collaboration and the sustainability of outcomes.

Research on fragile states has highlighted the challenges of capacity deficits, aid dependence, and limited legitimacy (Brinkerhoff, 2007; OECD, 2018). In such environments, collaboration across sectors is often driven more by necessity than by choice, as no single actor possesses sufficient authority or resources to address complex societal needs. Yet collaborative processes in fragile contexts also risk reproducing inequalities, exacerbating power asymmetries, or becoming donor-driven exercises with limited national ownership (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). This tension makes fragile states both an important and an underexplored domain for testing and refining collaborative governance theory.

Within the United Nations Development System (UNDS), Joint Programmes have been promoted as a key modality for operationalizing collaborative governance. A UN Joint Programme (UNJP) is defined as an initiative in which two or more UN agencies collaborate under a common results framework and funding arrangement. Joint Programmes are expected to reduce fragmentation, improve efficiency, and enhance alignment with national development strategies (UNEG, 2018). Their use has expanded significantly in recent years: United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) alone increased its expenditures on Joint Programmes from USD 135 million in 2017 to nearly USD 500 million in 2020 (UNICEF, 2021). However, evaluations highlight recurring challenges, including coordination failures, weak leadership, and competition for visibility among agencies (UNEG, 2018; OECD, 2020). These problems are often magnified in fragile states, where resource scarcity, high staff turnover, and limited donor engagement constrain collaborative effectiveness.

¹ In this study, the term “fragile state” is used in line with the OECD’s multidimensional understanding of fragility. A fragile state is not necessarily one affected by open conflict but rather one in which exposure to risks, such as institutional weakness, limited public service capacity, or vulnerability to political or economic shocks, is combined with insufficient ability by the state, system, or communities to manage, absorb, or mitigate those risks (OECD, 2020).

Despite the policy relevance of Joint Programmes, academic research has examined governance dynamics in fragile states primarily through the lenses of state building, political authority, and institutional capacity, including influential contributions on governance in areas of limited statehood and post-conflict settings (Risse, 2011; Lee, 2022). More recent studies have also examined collaborative and networked governance in African contexts, including in countries classified as fragile (Shava, 2023). Collaborative governance has also been examined in environmental management, urban and regional planning, and public service delivery (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Emerson et al., 2012). However, comparatively less attention has been paid to how collaborative governance arrangements operate within the United Nations Development System in fragile, resource-limited contexts, particularly at the level of inter-agency joint programming and regime-level performance. Moreover, while child welfare has been recognized as a cross-sectoral challenge, particularly in policy and programmatic literature on child rights, protection, and integrated service delivery (World Bank, 2011; UNICEF, 2019), there is a lack of empirical studies that analyze collaborative governance specifically in relation to child rights and welfare in fragile settings. This study builds on and extends these strands of literature by focusing on UN Joint Programmes as collaborative governance regimes, thereby linking fragile-state governance debates with the analysis of inter-agency collaboration within the UN system. This article addresses that gap by analyzing three UN Joint Programmes in The Republic of The Gambia (hereafter The Gambia), a small West African country that exemplifies the dilemmas of fragile and resource-limited governance. Following the democratic transition of 2017, The Gambia sought to consolidate peace and rebuild institutions after more than two decades of authoritarian rule. The government's National Development Plan (2018–2021) emphasized inclusion, accountability, and participation, but implementation capacity remained constrained by fiscal fragility and modest donor presence compared to other fragile states (OECD, 2018; World Bank, 2011). At the same time, with children and youth comprising over 60 percent of the population, child welfare represented both an urgent social need and a litmus test for the credibility of governance reforms.

The three Joint Programmes examined in this study provide a unique comparative lens. Two initiatives—Increased Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Strengthening Inclusive Citizen Engagement—were funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF). These programmes aimed to expand civic space, strengthen youth and women's participation, and consolidate democratic governance during the fragile transition. A third programme, Increasing Access to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Diagnostic and Treatment Centres, was financed by the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF) in response to the pandemic. This programme focused on strengthening health infrastructure, safeguarding maternal and child health, and supporting gender-based violence (GBV) services under emergency conditions. Together, these cases highlight the opportunities and limitation of collaborative governance under two distinct funding modalities—peacebuilding and emergency response—within the same fragile national context.

The study applies Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework, focusing on three regime-level performance dimensions:

- Efficacy of Actions and Outputs – the extent to which collaborative actions are implemented as intended and produce tangible results.
- External Legitimacy of Outcomes – the degree to which outcomes are recognized as credible and valuable by governments, civil society, and communities.

- Viability of Adaptation – the capacity of collaborative arrangements to adapt to evolving conditions and sustain results over time.

This framework provides an analytical structure for evaluating Joint Programmes in The Gambia, enabling both case-specific analysis and cross-case comparison. It also allows the study to contribute to theory by examining how fragile-state conditions alter collaborative governance dynamics.

The contributions of this article are threefold. First, it provides an empirical analysis of collaborative governance in child welfare, an area underrepresented in both collaborative governance and fragile state research. While studies of youth participation and peacebuilding have increased, child welfare governance remains underexplored despite its cross-sectoral importance. Second, the study refines CGR theory by showing how fragility—characterized by donor dependency, weak capacity, and limited institutional anchoring—affects the performance dimensions of collaborative regimes. At the same time, the Gambian case suggests that fragility can create enabling factors, such as small system scale, physical proximity among actors, and traditions of community engagement, that facilitate collaboration. Third, the article offers practical lessons for policymakers and practitioners designing Joint Programmes in fragile settings. The findings highlight the importance of shared vision, mandate alignment, and accountability mechanisms in generating both effective outputs and legitimate outcomes. Taken together, these contributions go beyond identifying an empirical gap by offering substantive insights derived from an in-depth investigation of The Gambia as a small, resource-limited, post-transition state.

More broadly, this article contributes to debates on the future of the UN Development System and the global governance of child welfare. The COVID-19 pandemic, rising geopolitical instability, and climate-related fragility have intensified scrutiny of whether the multilateral system is fit for purpose. Fragile states such as The Gambia provide critical testing grounds for reform: if collaborative governance mechanisms such as Joint Programmes can function effectively in these settings, they offer lessons for strengthening legitimacy, coherence, and resilience in international cooperation more broadly.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on collaborative governance, child welfare, and the UN Development System, and introduces the CGR framework. Section 3 outlines the methodology, including case selection and data sources. Section 4 presents the case study analysis, with Section 4.1 focusing on the PBF-funded programmes and Section 4.2 on the COVID-19 response. Section 5 provides a comparative discussion of findings, identifying enabling and constraining factors across the cases. Section 6 concludes with implications for theory, policy, and practice, particularly for advancing child welfare in fragile, resource-limited contexts.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 Collaborative Governance: Concepts and Debates

The notion of collaborative governance has gained prominence in public administration and policy studies as governments and international organizations confront complex, cross-sectoral challenges. Ansell and Gash (2007) highlight the institutionalized nature of collaboration, which distinguishes it from more ad hoc or consultative interactions. Collaborative governance involves actors with diverse interests and capacities who engage in joint problem-solving, motivated by interdependence and the recognition that no single actor can address the problem alone.

Literature identifies both opportunities and risks in collaboration. Collaboration can pool resources, enhance legitimacy, and generate innovation through shared learning (Bryson, Crosby & Stone, 2006; Emerson et al., 2012). On the other hand, collaboration is prone to inertia, power asymmetries, and conflict. Huxham and Vangen (2005) caution that collaboration is inherently “messy,” often involving trade-offs, hidden agendas, and difficulties in sustaining trust. The concept of collaborative advantage—the idea that the benefits of collaboration exceed the costs—coexists with collaborative inertia, where outcomes fail to materialize despite extensive effort.

To provide a systematic approach to these dynamics, Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) developed the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework. The framework emphasizes three core components: (1) drivers, such as leadership and interdependence; (2) collaborative dynamics, including principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity; and (3) performance outcomes, encompassing actions, legitimacy, and adaptation. Importantly, the CGR framework treats collaboration as a regime-level system rather than a one-off process, thereby enabling longitudinal analysis of how collaboration evolves and performs. While widely applied in studies of environmental governance, public health, and local government, the CGR framework has been less tested in fragile states, where institutional weakness may reshape drivers and outcomes.

Research on fragile contexts highlights that collaboration is often not voluntary but driven by necessity (Brinkerhoff, 2007; OECD, 2018). Limited state capacity and fragmented authority structures create strong incentives for pooling resources and mandates. At the same time, fragile environments amplify the risks of exclusion and donor dominance. As Brinkerhoff (2007) argues, governance in fragile states often oscillates between externally driven reforms and locally constrained implementation, with collaboration vulnerable to both power asymmetries and resource volatility. This suggests that while collaborative governance may be essential in fragile states, its performance must be evaluated against dimensions that go beyond efficiency, including legitimacy and adaptability.

2.2 Child Welfare as a Governance Challenge

Child welfare is inherently cross-sectoral, encompassing health, education, protection, and social policy. Effective governance of child welfare requires coordination across ministries, local authorities, civil society, and international partners. In fragile states, where institutions are weak and budgets constrained, children’s rights are often deprioritized in favor of immediate security or macroeconomic concerns (UNICEF, 2019). Yet investment in children yields high social and economic returns, particularly in early childhood development and youth participation (Heckman, 2011).

The governance of child welfare has been shaped by global norms such as the UNCRC, which obliges states to uphold children’s rights, and the SDGs, which integrate child-related targets across multiple goals. However, as several scholars note, translating these commitments into effective governance is particularly difficult in fragile settings (Booth, 2012; World Bank, 2011). Service delivery is often fragmented, with overlapping projects funded by external donors, while national ownership and sustainability remain weak. Collaborative governance provides a potential mechanism for aligning fragmented efforts and ensuring coherence around shared child-focused outcomes.

Despite its significance, the relationship between child welfare and collaborative governance has attracted limited scholarly attention. Existing research has concentrated primarily on youth participation and peacebuilding. For example, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2015) emphasizes the role of youth as

constructive actors in conflict transformation, while McEvoy-Levy (2014) explores how young people contribute to reshaping political narratives through their cultural and civic engagement. These contributions underline the importance of youth agency in fragile and transitional contexts. However, the broader governance of child rights through multilateral forms of collaboration remains under-researched. This study seeks to address that gap by examining the extent to which UN Joint Programmes in The Gambia engaged with child welfare directly, through initiatives in health and protection, and indirectly, through mechanisms designed to promote youth and citizen participation.

2.3 The UN Development System and Joint Programmes

The UN Development System (UNDS) has undergone successive reforms aimed at improving coherence, efficiency, and accountability (Nakazawa 2016; Hasuo, 2009). The 2018 repositioning of the Resident Coordinator system sought to strengthen coordination at the country level and ensure that UN support is aligned with national priorities. A central instrument of these reforms has been the UN Joint Programme (UNJP). A Joint Programme is an initiative in which two or more UN agencies collaborate under a single results framework and budgetary arrangement. The modality is designed to reduce fragmentation, enhance efficiency, and ensure that UN interventions are coherent with government strategies (UNEG, 2018). By pooling mandates and resources, Joint Programmes are expected to deliver outcomes that no single agency could achieve alone.

In practice, Joint Programmes have expanded rapidly. UNICEF reports that its expenditures on Joint Programmes rose from USD 135 million in 2017 to nearly USD 500 million in 2020 (UNICEF, 2021). This expansion reflects both internal incentives for coherence and external donor preferences for pooled funding mechanisms. However, evaluations have raised concerns about effectiveness. The UN Evaluation Group (2018) found that Joint Programmes often suffer from unclear governance structures, weak leadership, and competition for visibility among agencies. Similarly, the OECD (2020) highlighted that the benefits of pooled funding are often undermined by transaction costs and misaligned mandates.

These challenges are magnified in fragile states, where national institutions lack capacity to coordinate donor interventions and where resource constraints increase competition among agencies. In such contexts, the promise of Joint Programmes as mechanisms for coherence and legitimacy is especially significant, but so too are the risks of failure. The Gambian case provides a valuable opportunity to assess how Joint Programmes perform in practice in a fragile, resource-limited environment.

2.4 Analytical Framework: Collaborative Governance Regimes (CGRs)

This study applies to the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework developed by Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) as an analytical lens to examine how collaborative arrangements function within the United Nations Development System (UNDS). The CGR framework conceptualizes collaborative governance not as a single event or managerial technique, but as a regime-level system of interaction among multiple actors engaged in structured, cross-boundary collaboration to achieve public purposes. In this article, the CGR framework is used for analytical purposes, rather than as an evaluative model for assessing programme success or failure.

The CGR framework identifies multiple performance dimensions across different units of analysis, including participant organizations, the collaborative governance regime itself, and broader target goals. While the original framework encompasses nine interrelated performance dimensions, this study deliberately narrows its analytical

focus to three dimensions at the level of the collaborative governance regime: efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation (see Table 1). This focus reflects the central research interest of the study, which is to understand the institutional functioning of collaborative governance arrangements, rather than to evaluate organizational efficiency or sector-specific policy outcomes.

The selection of these three dimensions is guided by both theoretical and contextual considerations. From a theoretical perspective, CGR-level (Unit of Analysis) performance dimensions capture the collective properties of collaboration that emerge through interaction among actors, consistent with Emerson and Nabatchi's conception of CGR as dynamic systems. From a contextual perspective, these dimensions are particularly salient in fragile and resource-limited settings, where questions of implementation capacity (efficacy), social and political acceptance (external legitimacy), and institutional sustainability (viability) are more consequential than narrow measures of output efficiency. By focusing on efficacy, external legitimacy, and viability, this study enables a systematic and comparative analysis of UN Joint Programmes in The Gambia, while maintaining coherence with the broader CGR framework. This analytical focus provides a structured basis for examining how collaborative governance arrangements perform under conditions of fragility and resource constraint.

Table 1: Performance Dimension of Collaborative Governance Regimes

Unit of Analysis	Performance Level		
	Actions/Outputs	Outcomes	Adaptation
Participant Organization	Efficiency	Effectiveness	Equilibrium
CGR	Efficacy	External Legitimacy	Viability
Target Goals	Equity	Effectiveness	Sustainability

(Source: Emerson and Nabachi 2015: 723)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case study design to examine how collaborative governance arrangements operate in practice within fragile, resource-limited contexts. A multi-case approach is appropriate for exploring complex governance phenomena where causal mechanisms are context-dependent and cannot be isolated through variable-based analysis. By examining multiple UN Joint Programmes within a single national setting, the study enables both within-case analysis and cross-case comparison, strengthening analytical robustness.

In operational terms, the qualitative multi-case study design functions by examining each Joint Programme as a bounded case situated within a shared national and institutional context. Each case is first analysed individually to document programme objectives, implementation processes, coordination arrangements, and stakeholder perceptions. This within-case analysis allows for the identification of patterns and issues specific to each programme. The cases are then examined comparatively to identify similarities and contrasts across programme modalities, particularly with respect to funding arrangements and governance focus. This stepwise approach enables analytical generalization by identifying mechanisms and conditions that shape collaborative governance performance, rather than seeking statistical representativeness.

The analytical framework is provided by Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) Collaborative Governance Regime

(CGR) model, which conceptualizes collaboration as a system composed of drivers, dynamics, and performance outcomes. For the purposes of this study, attention is directed to the three performance dimensions at the CGR Unit of Analysis: efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation. These dimensions guided both data collection and analysis, enabling a systematic assessment of collaborative performance in each programme.

3.2 Case Selection

The case study focuses on three UN Joint Programmes implemented in The Gambia between 2018 and 2021. The Gambia was identified as a critical case rather than as a representative fragile state, and as one of the smallest countries in mainland Africa, characterized by a highly resource-limited governance system. This combination makes The Gambia an analytically appropriate context for examining collaborative governance under conditions of acute capacity and resource constraints. Following its democratic transition in 2017, The Gambia faced high expectations for reform but continued to struggle with structural fragility, including fiscal limitations, limited donor presence, and weak institutional capacity. This combination of small country size, limited administrative capacity, and political reform momentum characterizes a post-transition form of fragility, even in the absence of active conflict. Children and youth, representing over half the population, were both among the most vulnerable groups and central to the government's reform agenda.

All UN Joint Programmes in which UNICEF participated during the study period were identified, reflecting UNICEF's mandate in child welfare. All such programmes were included in the analysis, and three were examined in greater depth because they directly or indirectly addressed child welfare outcomes and involved multi-agency collaborative governance arrangements.

The three programmes analyzed are:

- Increased Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making, implemented by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the UNICEF, and funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (PBF).
- Strengthening Inclusive and Accountable Citizen Engagement in Governance, implemented by the UNDP and the UNICEF, and also funded by the PBF.
- Increasing Access to COVID-19 Diagnostic and Treatment Centres, implemented by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), the UNICEF, and the UNFPA, and funded by the United Nations COVID-19 Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF).

Examining these three programmes in greater depth allows the study to address two analytical purposes. First, they represent different funding modalities: two peacebuilding initiatives supported by the PBF and one emergency health response funded by the MPTF. This variation allows for comparison across institutional arrangements while holding the national context constant. PBF-funded programmes are designed to support medium-term governance reform and peacebuilding through inclusive political and institutional processes, whereas the MPTF-funded programme examined in this study was designed as a time-bound emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis. These funding modalities entail different coordination requirements, implementation time horizons, and decision-making structures, which shape how collaborative governance is organized and enacted. The funding modality is therefore treated as an analytical proxy for variation in institutional arrangements rather than as a financial variable in itself. Rather than pursuing cross-national comparison, the study adopts a within-country multi-case design

suited to a small-state context, enabling systematic comparison of programme modalities under the same constrained national conditions. Second, the three programmes collectively capture key dimensions of child welfare governance, whether through participatory governance (youth engagement, women's representation, citizen platforms) or service delivery (health, protection, gender-based violence response) as a critical areas which require multisectoral collaboration— areas that inherently require multisectoral collaboration in small, resource-limited fragile states.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through a combination of document review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. The primary purpose of the interviews and group discussions was to complement documentary evidence by capturing stakeholder perspectives on how collaborative governance arrangements functioned in practice. Interviews were used to elicit experiential and perceptual data that could not be fully captured through programme documents, particularly regarding coordination processes, perceived legitimacy, and adaptive capacity. The interview and focus group discussion guides were designed to align with the three Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) performance dimensions examined in this study—efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation—so that empirical data could be systematically linked to the analytical framework.

- Document review included programme proposals, results frameworks, monitoring reports, evaluation reports, and internal UN documents. These provided information on design intentions, implementation progress, and reported outcomes.
- Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 77 stakeholders, including UN staff, government officials, civil society leaders, and community representatives. Respondents were selected to capture diverse perspectives on programme performance, legitimacy, and sustainability. Respondents were identified using purposive sampling, based on their direct involvement in or informed knowledge of the Joint Programmes and their collaborative governance arrangements.
- Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 319 participants across all administrative regions of The Gambia. Participants included youth, women, community leaders, and local government representatives. FGDs allowed for triangulation of individual interviews and provided insight into community perceptions of programme outcomes.
- Field observations were conducted at programme sites, including youth participation platforms, citizen engagement forums, and COVID-19 treatment centres. These observations provided contextual understanding and enabled validation of reported outputs.

Interviews and FGDs were conducted in English and local languages, with translation support provided where necessary. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and emphasizing voluntary participation.

The interview and focus group discussion guides were structured in alignment with the three Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) performance dimensions used in this study. Questions related to efficacy of actions focused on implementation processes, coordination mechanisms, and perceptions of whether planned activities were carried out as intended. External legitimacy was explored through questions addressing stakeholder perceptions of inclusiveness, credibility, and responsiveness of programme outcomes. Viability of adaptation was

examined through questions concerning sustainability, institutional embedding, learning, and prospects for continuation beyond the programme cycle. This alignment ensured coherence between data collection and the analytical framework and strengthened the transparency and replicability of the qualitative analysis.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic coding strategy aligned with the three CGR performance dimensions. Evidence was organized under the categories of efficacy of actions, external legitimacy, and viability of adaptation. Coding was applied iteratively, with discrepancies across sources retained to reflect divergent stakeholder perspectives. Triangulation across documents, interviews, FGDs, and field observations enhanced the reliability of findings. Patterns were identified within each case and then compared across cases to generate broader insights into collaborative governance in fragile contexts.

To mitigate researcher bias, several strategies were employed. First, the use of multiple data sources ensured that no single perspective dominated the analysis. Second, local enumerators facilitated FGDs, reducing barriers of language and cultural familiarity. Third, preliminary findings were shared informally with selected stakeholders for feedback and sense-checking, without constituting a formal participatory process.

3.5 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted in a resource-limited environment, and data availability was uneven. Some programme documents were incomplete or not publicly accessible. To mitigate this, documentary evidence was triangulated with interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations, which allowed for cross-checking and validation across sources.

Second, while interviews and FGDs captured diverse perspectives, they were inevitably shaped by power dynamics. As interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at or near programme sites, it is possible that other individuals, including programme staff, were present in the vicinity. To mitigate potential influence, interviews were conducted in settings that allowed for privacy to the extent feasible, and participants were informed that their responses would remain confidential and would not affect their relationship with the programme or implementing agencies.

Although all programmes had been completed at the time of data collection, interviews were conducted at different points following programme completion, reflecting practical constraints related to access and availability. This timing variation may have influenced the salience of particular experiences or reflections recalled by participants. While this introduces a limitation for strict comparability across cases, it also enabled the study to capture retrospective perspectives on programme processes and collaborative dynamics across the programme lifecycle.

Community participants, particularly women and youth, may have been reluctant to criticize UN or government initiatives openly. This limitation was mitigated by using trained local facilitators who conducted discussions in local languages and who created safe, confidential spaces for dialogue. These measures encouraged more open participation and helped balance potential power asymmetries.

Third, the study focuses on three programmes within a single national context. While The Gambia provides a valuable lens, findings should be interpreted with caution when considering their relevance to other fragile states. To address this, the analysis situates the Gambian experience within broader theoretical debates on collaborative

governance and fragility, thereby allowing the case findings to speak to dynamics that resonate in comparable settings.

Finally, as with most qualitative case studies, causal attribution is limited. The study does not seek to isolate the effects of collaborative governance from other factors but instead aims to provide an in-depth account of how collaborative arrangements function in practice. This limitation was mitigated by focusing on processes, interactions, and stakeholder perceptions, which make it possible to draw out the mechanisms and contextual factors that shaped collaborative outcomes without claiming direct causal measurement.

4. Case Study Analysis

Section 4 presents the empirical case analysis of three UN Joint Programmes in The Gambia, drawing on documentary evidence, key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and field observations. The purpose of this section is to describe and organize empirical evidence on how collaborative arrangements functioned in practice, rather than to offer evaluative judgments or theoretical interpretations. Accordingly, the analysis in this section focuses on factual accounts and stakeholder perceptions as reported by respondents and documented in programme materials. Statements regarding programme achievements, challenges, and perceptions of legitimacy are grounded in primary data sources, including interviews with UN staff, government officials, civil society actors, and community representatives, as well as FGDs conducted across regions. Where general patterns are described (e.g., “widely acknowledged” or “commonly perceived”), these reflect recurring themes identified across multiple interviews and discussions, rather than normative assessments by the author. Theoretical interpretation and cross-case comparison are intentionally reserved for Section 5, where the empirical findings presented here are examined through the lens of the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework, with particular attention to efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation.

4.1 Increased Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making (PBF-Funded)

Following the 2017 democratic transition, the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) supported governance-oriented Joint Programmes aimed at strengthening inclusion, participation, and democratic consolidation in The Gambia. The Increased Women and Youth Participation in Decision-Making programme was implemented between 2018 and 2020 by UNFPA and UNICEF and aligned with the government’s National Development Plan (2018–2021).

The programme created new opportunities for engagement through the establishment of Peace Hubs, the strengthening of the Children’s National Assembly of The Gambia (CNAG), and the launch of the Inter-Party Committee (IPC) Youth Branch. Peace Hubs are community-based platforms designed to provide safe spaces for youth and women to engage in civic dialogue, peacebuilding activities, and leadership training. Located across different regions, they functioned as grassroots nodes for participation, linking local concerns with national policy debates.

Programme monitoring data and post-training assessments reported measurable improvements in civic knowledge and confidence among participating youth and women. Across Peace Hub participants, internal assessments indicated an average 31–34 per cent increase in self-reported civic knowledge and understanding of local decision-making processes between baseline and endline surveys. FGDs further indicated that over two-thirds of participants (approximately 65–70 per cent) reported increased willingness to engage with elected representatives

or participate in community decision-making forums compared to their pre-programme engagement levels. As one youth participant described in a focus group discussion, “Before, we did not believe our voices could reach those in power, but now we are sitting in the same room with parliamentarians” (Youth participant, FGD, Brikama, June 2019).

CNAG is a formal child-led parliamentary structure designed to mirror the National Assembly. It brings together child representatives from all regions to debate issues affecting children—such as education, health, and protection—and to present resolutions to national authorities. Strengthening CNAG institutionalized children’s voices within governance processes, enhancing legitimacy and social capital. According to CNAG attendance records and UNICEF monitoring reports referenced in the thesis, the number of active child representatives participating in national-level assemblies increased by approximately 40 per cent over the programme period, with representation from all administrative regions achieved for the first time. Teachers and facilitators reported observable improvements in children’s public-speaking confidence and policy literacy, corroborated by FGDs in which a majority of child participants described greater awareness of rights, parliamentary procedures, and advocacy pathways. A woman leader involved in CNAG debates reflected, “Speaking in the Assembly gave me courage; I now feel ready to contest elections in my district” (Women’s group representative, FGD, Kanifing, July 2019).

The IPC Youth Branch was established as a formal extension of the national IPC, which brings political parties together to support peaceful democratic processes. For the first time, young party members from across political divides were able to meet, deliberate, and collaborate. Participants reported reduced mistrust and a stronger culture of dialogue (IPC Youth Branch member, KII, Banjul, August 2019). Interviews with IPC Youth Branch members indicated a reported reduction in perceived inter-party mistrust among youth participants, with approximately 60 per cent of interviewed members stating that cross-party dialogue had improved compared to pre-programme conditions. Several respondents linked this change directly to structured, repeated interaction facilitated under the Joint Programme framework.

The programme delivered planned outputs within the PBF’s short funding cycle and was widely perceived as innovative. However, implementation was uneven across regions, with urban areas benefiting more than rural communities. While platforms such as CNAG and the IPC Youth Branch continued beyond the programme cycle, their long-term sustainability remained uncertain due to limited legislative anchoring and continued reliance on donor support.

4.2 Strengthening Inclusive and Accountable Citizen Engagement in Governance (PBF-Funded)

The Strengthening Inclusive and Accountable Citizen Engagement in Governance programme was implemented between 2018 and 2020 by UNDP and UNICEF, with financing from the PBF. The programme aimed to strengthen institutional interfaces between citizens and the state and was closely aligned with national priorities on democratic consolidation and accountability.

Key interventions focused on supporting the National Assembly and local councils, fostering structured dialogue between citizens and elected representatives, and providing civic education materials to promote informed participation. These activities sought to move beyond ad hoc consultation by embedding citizen engagement within formal governance processes.

Programme records and post-event surveys indicated that structured citizen–state dialogue forums reached several

hundred participants across multiple regions, with approximately 70 per cent of participants reporting improved understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the National Assembly and local councils. Focus group discussions further suggested that a majority of participants (around two-thirds) were better able to articulate community priorities and follow up on government commitments compared to previous consultation experiences.

Stakeholders acknowledged that the programme enhanced opportunities for dialogue and improved awareness of civic rights and responsibilities. External legitimacy was reinforced through alignment with international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals and UN norms on participation and accountability.

UNDP and UNICEF monitoring data further pointed to qualitative improvements in accountability practices: local council representatives in several pilot areas reported increased frequency of citizen feedback sessions, while citizen participants noted clearer channels for presenting grievances and tracking institutional responses. Although not designed as a quantitative governance reform programme, these shifts were consistently referenced across key informant interviews and focus group discussions as tangible improvements in participatory governance practices. Government officials described the programme as helping to “create a bridge between citizens and institutions,” while civil society actors emphasized its role in normalizing dialogue between communities and elected representatives (KIIs, 2019).

At the same time, challenges emerged around mandate alignment and institutional depth. Overlaps between agency roles created risks of duplication, and coordination demands were high relative to available capacity.

While engagement mechanisms demonstrated short-term effectiveness, internal programme reflections noted that fewer than half of the supported dialogue platforms had secured formal integration into local government planning or budgeting processes by programme completion, limiting the durability of these gains.

While some engagement mechanisms continued informally after programme completion, the absence of strong institutional anchoring limited prospects for sustained adaptation.

4.3 COVID-19 Response Programme: UN MPTF-Funded

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented crisis for The Gambia, exposing the fragility of its health system and limited social protection capacity. The programme description and implementation characteristics presented in this section are based on official Joint Programme documents, monitoring reports, and evaluation materials, complemented by key informant interviews (UNEG, 2018). In response, the UN launched a Joint Programme in 2020 financed through the UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF). Implemented by UNOPS, UNICEF, and UNFPA, the programme aimed to expand diagnostic and treatment capacity, maintain essential maternal and child health services, and strengthen support for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV).

The programme was designed around two critical interventions. First, the construction of dedicated COVID-19 treatment centres was intended not only to provide emergency care but also to strengthen national preparedness for future health crises. These centres represented one of the most visible investments of the Joint Programme and became a focal point in debates about its value. Second, the strengthening of GBV referral pathways aimed to ensure that survivors of violence could access health, psychosocial, and legal services even during the pandemic, when lockdown measures and heightened household stress exacerbated protection risks. By integrating GBV services with maternal and child health, the programme sought to safeguard vulnerable populations and address structural gaps in the health system.

The programme achieved several visible outputs. Three treatment centres were constructed, WASH facilities

were installed, personal protective equipment (PPE) was distributed, and frontline health workers were trained. UNICEF integrated maternal and child health services into the pandemic response, while UNFPA strengthened GBV referral pathways. These achievements demonstrated the UN's ability to mobilize resources and deliver infrastructure rapidly. However, coordination challenges emerged, most notably the limited engagement of WHO despite its technical mandate. As a result, some treatment centres remained underutilized due to staffing shortages and shifting epidemiological patterns, raising questions about efficiency.

Legitimacy was perceived unevenly across stakeholders. National authorities valued the treatment centres as long-term assets for preparedness, even if their immediate use was limited. Community members, however, expressed frustration that some facilities were not operational when demand was greatest.

A senior Ministry of Health official argued, "Even if some centres were empty during COVID, they are an investment in preparedness; next time we will not be caught off guard" (Government official, KII, Banjul, November 2020). In contrast, a youth leader in a community FGD asked, "What is the use of a hospital if it has no doctors inside when people are sick?" (Youth leader, FGD, Upper River Region, December 2020). These contrasting perspectives reflect Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) emphasis on legitimacy as a contested dimension of collaborative governance, shaped by stakeholder expectations and perceptions over time.

In contrast, the integration of maternal and child health and GBV services was widely appreciated, enhancing trust in UN-supported interventions. Civil society organizations welcomed these efforts, with one CSO representative noting, "When health workers reached out to women in crisis, it showed the UN was listening to our realities" (CSO leader, KII, Serekunda, December 2020). This responsiveness illustrates how legitimacy can be enhanced through downward accountability, consistent with Ansell and Gash's (2007) finding that collaborative processes succeed when they visibly address citizen concerns.

The COVID-19 response also revealed a complex negotiation of value. While some stakeholders criticized underutilization, others framed the centres as valuable long-term assets that would strengthen preparedness for future crises. This divergence highlights that collaborative outcomes in fragile contexts cannot be judged solely by immediate outputs but must also consider differing value frames. Such negotiation reflects what Emerson et al. (2012) describes as the need for ongoing adaptation of expectations and performance criteria within collaborative regimes.

The viability of adaptation remained constrained. The absence of an exit strategy, limited integration into national budgets, and weak institutional learning mechanisms undermined long-term prospects. While some infrastructure may serve future needs, the programme also exposed the vulnerabilities of emergency aid, which prioritizes rapid delivery but often neglects institutional embedding. This finding resonates with OECD (2018), which cautions that short-term donor interventions often erode the adaptive capacity of fragile states.

Compared with the PBF programmes, which created participatory platforms that persisted beyond the project cycle, the COVID-19 response was more vulnerable to discontinuity. It demonstrated the strengths of emergency funding—speed and flexibility—but also its weaknesses, including fragile legitimacy and limited adaptation. Yet for some stakeholders, the treatment centres symbolized a critical investment in state capacity. As one health worker noted, "Even if they were not used this time, they are there for the next outbreak" (Health worker, KII, Kanifing, January 2021). This duality illustrates Emerson and Nabatchi's (2015) point that collaborative governance regimes are dynamic systems where perceptions of value and viability vary across actors and evolve over time.

5. Findings and Comparative Discussion

Section 5 provides a comparative discussion of the findings presented in the preceding case analysis. Building explicitly on the empirical evidence described in Section 4, this section shifts from data-based description to analytical interpretation. The discussion examines patterns across cases through the lens of the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework, focusing on three regime-level performance dimensions: efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation.

The comparative analysis of the PBF-funded programmes and the COVID-19 response highlights both commonalities and contrasts in how collaborative governance operates in fragile and resource-limited settings. Using the Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework, three performance dimensions—efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation—emerge as central to understanding programme results. By linking empirical evidence from The Gambia with theoretical insights, the analysis contributes to understanding how collaborative governance functions under conditions of fragility, where donor dependence, institutional weakness, and urgent needs reshape the dynamics of inter-organizational collaboration.

5.1 Efficacy of Actions and Outputs

Across all three programmes, collaborative action yielded tangible outputs. The PBF-funded initiatives succeeded in creating innovative platforms for youth and women's participation, such as Peace Hubs, the Children's National Assembly, and the Inter-Party Committee Youth Branch. These structures enabled the inclusion of groups historically marginalized from governance processes and were widely recognized as significant innovations in The Gambia's democratic transition. The Citizen Engagement programme further enhanced parliamentary capacity and civic education, providing mechanisms through which citizens could engage elected representatives.

These outputs illustrate what Huxham and Vangen (2005) call "collaborative advantage," where joint initiatives produced benefits beyond the scope of individual agencies. As a youth participant stated during an FGD, "Before, we did not believe our voices could reach those in power, but now we are sitting in the same room with parliamentarians" (FGD, Brikama, 2019). The delivery of these new participatory spaces shows that even in fragile contexts, collaboration can expand the reach of governance when partners pool resources and mandates.

The COVID-19 response programme, though distinct in focus, also achieved visible outputs. Treatment centres were built, WASH facilities were improved, and health workers were trained. UNICEF integrated maternal and child health services into the pandemic response, while UNFPA strengthened gender-based violence referral systems. These activities demonstrated the UN's ability to mobilize resources rapidly in the face of crisis.

Yet the efficacy of output diverged significantly across the two funding modalities. The PBF-funded programmes benefitted from strong alignment with political transition priorities, enabling activities to proceed largely as intended. Output was not only delivered but also embedded in broader governance debates. By contrast, the COVID-19 response suffered from coordination gaps, and some of its outputs, such as treatment centres, were underutilized due to staffing shortages and shifting epidemiological needs. This reflects Ansell and Gash's (2007) emphasis on the importance of "starting conditions," since weak initial coordination undermined implementation and limited the effectiveness of joint action.

These findings suggest that in fragile contexts, efficacy is not simply a matter of economical execution but depends on whether outputs align with local priorities, institutional mandates, and governance transitions (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Peace-building programmes benefitted from this alignment, while emergency responses, though fast, risked producing outputs mismatched to immediate community needs.

5.2 External Legitimacy of Outcomes

Legitimacy emerged as a central determinant of programme performance. The PBF-funded programmes enhanced legitimacy by aligning with both national and international norms. They drew on frameworks such as the UNCRC, the SDGs, and UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security, thereby reinforcing the normative weight of their interventions. National authorities, civil society, and beneficiaries generally viewed these programmes as credible efforts to expand democratic participation. As one CSO leader noted, “The government must listen to youth and women now—these programmes opened the space for that” (CSO, KII, Serekunda, 2019). This shows how legitimacy is constructed through perceived responsiveness as much as through international alignment, consistent with Emerson and Nabatchi’s (2015) emphasis on legitimacy as relational and contested.

By contrast, the legitimacy of the COVID-19 response was contested. National authorities praised the construction of treatment centres as symbols of preparedness, even if they were not fully utilized during the pandemic. However, community members expressed frustration that some facilities remained unused when they were most needed. As a youth leader asked, “What is the use of a [treatment] center if it has no doctors inside when people are sick?” (FGD, URR, 2020). At the same time, a Ministry of Health official argued, “Even if some centres were empty during COVID, they are an investment in preparedness; next time we will not be caught off guard” (KII, Banjul, 2020). These divergent perspectives reflect legitimacy as a contested process, where different actors apply different criteria of value depending on their expectations and time horizons.

The integration of maternal and child health and GBV services, however, was widely appreciated and reinforced trust in UN-supported interventions. This responsiveness illustrates how downward accountability strengthens legitimacy (Ansell & Gash, 2007), highlighting that legitimacy in fragile contexts depends not only on alignment with global frameworks but also on visible responsiveness to community needs.

Overall, the comparison shows that legitimacy in fragile contexts is negotiated through both symbolic and practical dimensions. The PBF programmes enhanced legitimacy by linking international norms with local participation, while the COVID-19 programme showed that legitimacy can be fragile if outputs are not perceived as relevant or inclusive.

5.3 Viability of Adaptation

The viability of adaptation emerged as the weakest dimension across all three programmes, but it is also the most revealing for understanding the limits of collaborative governance in fragile contexts. Adaptation refers not only to flexibility during implementation but also to the ability of collaborative arrangements to persist, evolve, and embed themselves institutionally over time (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). In The Gambia, both the PBF-funded programmes and the COVID-19 response showed partial adaptability, but long-term viability was constrained by short funding cycles, limited budget integration, and donor dependence.

The PBF initiatives created participatory platforms such as CNAG and the IPC Youth Branch that persisted

beyond the project cycle. These structures demonstrated some adaptive capacity by continuing to function with limited external support, suggesting that collaborative arrangements had generated momentum among local actors. As one youth member of CNAG explained, “Even after the programme ended, we still meet, because we feel it is our responsibility to represent children’s voices” (CNAG participant, FGD, Banjul, 2020). This illustrates that social capital, once created, can sustain a degree of adaptation even in the absence of formal institutional anchoring.

However, the long-term viability of these platforms remains uncertain. Without legislative frameworks or government budget lines, their continuation depends on external donors or sporadic project funding. The PBF’s short funding horizon—typically two to three years—provided little time for embedding outcomes in state systems. This aligns with Brinkerhoff’s (2007) analysis that externally supported reforms in fragile states often produce temporary gains but lack the institutional depth to endure. Furthermore, competition among UN agencies discouraged joint planning for sustainability, as agencies prioritized visibility and future funding opportunities over collective embedding, especially under resource limited environment.

The COVID-19 response illustrated a different pattern. In the short term, the programme adapted quickly, reallocating resources to meet emerging needs and integrating maternal health and GBV services into emergency interventions. This flexibility was important for maintaining essential services during the crisis. Yet, the absence of an exit strategy, weak integration into national health budgets, and limited institutional learning mechanisms all undermined long-term adaptation. As a Ministry of Health official admitted, “We received the [treatment] centres, but we do not yet have the resources to run them fully” (Government official, KII, Banjul, 2021). The treatment centres became a symbol of contested adaptation. Some actors saw them as long-term assets for preparedness—“Even if they were not used this time, they are there for the next outbreak” (Health worker, KII, Kanifing, 2021)—while others criticized them as underutilized investments that diverted attention from immediate service delivery. This divergence highlights that adaptation viability is not only about institutional capacity but also about how different stakeholders define value over time.

Comparatively, the PBF programmes had stronger prospects for adaptation because they were embedded in governance reforms and linked to participation agendas. They generated platforms that, at least in the short term, continued beyond donor funding. The COVID-19 response, by contrast, demonstrated high short-term adaptability but lacked the institutionalization required for long-term viability. This difference underscores the tension between peacebuilding and emergency modalities: peacebuilding programmes move slowly but have greater potential to embed, while emergency programmes act quickly but often remain ephemeral.

These findings reinforce OECD’s (2018) warning that donor-driven projects in fragile contexts often undermine adaptive capacity by focusing on short-term outputs rather than systemic embedding. They also highlight Emerson and Nabatchi’s (2015) insight that adaptation viability is relational, depending on both institutional structures and stakeholder commitment. In The Gambia, fragility magnified both constraints and opportunities: weak state capacity limited institutional embedding, but small system size and strong community networks created niches of continuity, such as CNAG and Peace Hubs.

Ultimately, viability of adaptation in fragile contexts requires a combination of flexible emergency response and deliberate institutional embedding. The Gambian cases demonstrate that while collaborative governance can adapt to immediate shocks, its long-term contribution depends on integration into state budgets, legislation, and accountability systems. Without these, collaborative arrangements risk becoming temporary projects rather than enduring governance regimes.

5.4 Summary of Findings and Discussions

The comparative analysis of the PBF-funded programmes and the COVID-19 response highlights the promises and constraints of collaborative governance in fragile contexts. Using the CGR framework, three dimensions — efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes, and viability of adaptation — provided a consistent lens to evaluate performance. The evidence demonstrates that while collaborative governance is possible in fragile and resource-limited contexts, its results are uneven, contested, and shaped by both enabling and constraining factors. Across the two funding modalities, several commonalities were evident. Both PBF and MPTF programmes delivered tangible outputs, often under difficult circumstances. They also contributed to enhancing legitimacy, whether through participatory structures (in the PBF programmes) or through service delivery to vulnerable populations (in the COVID-19 response). However, in both modalities the viability of adaptation was the weakest performance dimension, as short project cycles, donor dependence, and limited institutional anchoring constrained long-term prospects. This reinforces Brinkerhoff's (2007) and OECD's (2018) warnings that donor-driven initiatives in fragile states often produce temporary gains without systemic embedding.

Yet, the analysis also revealed important contrasts. The PBF-funded programmes benefitted from a clear shared vision rooted in The Gambia's democratic transition, which helped to create coherence and sustain collaboration despite institutional weaknesses. As one UN staff member noted, "Everyone understood that participation was the foundation of the transition — it kept us working together" (KII, Banjul, 2019). In contrast, the COVID-19 response lacked such a unifying vision, as emergency imperatives prioritized speed over consensus, reflecting what Huxham and Vangen (2005) describe as the risk of "collaborative inertia" when purpose is unclear.

Mandate alignment also distinguished outcomes. In the PBF programmes, complementarity between UNICEF's youth mandate and UNDP's governance expertise strengthened delivery, while UNFPA's work on women's empowerment expanded inclusivity. However, the absence of UNDP in the Women and Youth Participation programme was viewed as a credibility gap by national actors. "We respected UNICEF and UNFPA, but governance is not their core mandate," observed a government counterpart (KII, Banjul, 2019). Similarly, in the COVID-19 response, WHO's weak involvement left gaps in technical leadership. These findings echo UNEG's (2018) review of Joint Programmes, which identified mandate overlap and competition as persistent challenges.

Accountability mechanisms were also limited across all programmes. Monitoring and evaluation remained largely agency-driven, and community members were seldom asked to assess outcomes. As a youth participant expressed, "We were invited to events, but afterwards no one asked if it made a difference" (FGD, Brikama, 2020). This lack of downward accountability weakened legitimacy and learning, confirming Ansell and Gash's (2007) argument that collaborative processes require strong feedback loops to sustain trust.

Despite these weaknesses, the study also revealed how fragility can create enabling conditions. The small size of The Gambia's governance system and the physical proximity of UN agencies facilitated coordination. Traditions of community engagement further reinforced legitimacy. In the PBF programmes, platforms like CNAG and Peace Hubs created inclusive spaces that endured beyond the funding cycle, even without full institutional anchoring. In the COVID-19 programme, the contested treatment centres nevertheless symbolized long-term preparedness for some stakeholders. "Even if they were not used this time, they are there for the next outbreak" (Health worker, KII, Kanifing, 2021). These examples show that fragility should not be seen only as a constraint but also as a condition that can generate opportunities for collaboration.

From a practical perspective, the findings generate several lessons. First, mandate-driven leadership matters: when agencies led in areas of clear mandate, collaboration was credible and effective, but where mandates were absent, legitimacy was questioned. Second, institutional anchoring is critical: participatory platforms require legislative or budgetary integration to persist beyond donor cycles. Third, accountability must extend downward: beneficiaries must be engaged in monitoring and evaluation if legitimacy is to be sustained. Finally, balancing short-term responsiveness with long-term adaptation is essential: while emergency programmes delivered speed, they lacked embedding; peacebuilding programmes created enduring platforms, but suffered from short horizons. These lessons highlight that collaborative governance in fragile states requires deliberate design choices that mitigate risks of short-termism while investing in sustainability.

Taking together, these findings suggest three overarching insights. First, efficacy in fragile contexts depends not only on implementation but on whether outputs align with political priorities, agency mandates, and community needs. Second, legitimacy is relational and contested, shaped as much by perceptions of inclusion and responsiveness as by alignment with international frameworks. Third, adaptation viability remains the central weakness of collaborative governance in fragile contexts, constrained by donor cycles and weak institutions, yet partially sustained through social capital and community ownership. These insights refine the CGR framework by showing that fragility amplifies both collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, making outcomes highly contingent on contextual dynamics.

This synthesis provides the foundation for the conclusion. The following chapter considers the theoretical and empirical implications of these findings, as well as the scope for future research.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This study contributes both empirical evidence and theoretical refinement to the study of collaborative governance (CG), with specific attention to child welfare in fragile and resource-limited contexts. While prior scholarship by Provan and Milward (2001), Radin (2006), and Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) laid the groundwork for understanding collaborative governance, this research advances the field by exploring how collaboration functions in fragile states, where resource scarcity, political pressures, and systemic constraints shape inter-organizational dynamics in distinctive ways.

Empirically, the study addresses a persistent gap in literature by offering one of the first in-depth analyses of UN Joint Programmes in a fragile, low-resource state. Despite the prominence of child welfare in global policy, little empirical work has examined how collaborative governance operates in low-resource fragile states, particularly for children and young people. Drawing on three UN Joint Programmes in The Gambia, the research shows how collaborative governance can coordinate diverse actors — governments, civil society, international organizations, and communities — to respond to the complex and multidimensional needs of children. By incorporating extensive qualitative evidence, the study captures how collaborative arrangements were perceived not only by UN staff and government actors but also by community leaders, youth, and women. These perspectives highlight the necessity of collaboration in fragile contexts, not simply its desirability.

Theoretically, the study refines Emerson and Nabatchi's Collaborative Governance Regime (CGR) framework. By applying the framework's three CGR-level dimensions — efficacy of actions, external legitimacy of outcomes,

and viability of adaptation — the research demonstrates their relevance in fragile contexts, while also showing the need for greater sensitivity to power dynamics, donor incentives, and institutional fragility. Findings confirm that efficacy in fragile settings depends less on implementation alone than on alignment with political priorities, agency mandates, and community needs. Legitimacy is shown to be relational and contested: while national authorities and UN staff judged outcomes in terms of alignment with reform agendas or preparedness, communities evaluated legitimacy by immediate responsiveness to their needs. Adaptation viability emerged as the most constrained dimension, undermined by short donor cycles and lack of institutional embedding, though partially sustained through social capital and community ownership. Together, these findings extend CGR theory by showing how fragility amplifies both collaborative advantage and collaborative inertia, and by emphasizing the temporal dynamics of short-term adaptability versus long-term viability.

Conceptually, the research identifies three strategic principles for effective collaboration in fragile, resource-limited contexts: shared vision, mandate alignment, and accountability for results. Shared vision was critical for coherence in the PBF-funded programmes, which were rooted in The Gambia's democratic transition, but less evident in the COVID-19 response, where urgency fragmented consensus. Mandate alignment shaped credibility: collaboration worked best when agency leadership corresponded with established mandates, while misalignments legitimized. Accountability was consistently the weakest pillar, with limited feedback mechanisms for communities. This confirms that accountability must extend beyond vertical reporting to donors, encompassing downward accountability to citizens and horizontal accountability across agencies.

These insights also carry implications for global governance. As international cooperation faces shrinking resources, rising nationalism, and demands for demonstrable efficiency, collaborative governance offers a mechanism that aligns with the principles of country ownership, mutual accountability, and results-based management promoted in UN reforms and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2005). However, as this research shows, collaboration in resource limited fragile contexts must be understood as inherently political: shaped by donor priorities, institutional capacity, and historical relationships. Recognizing fragility as both a constraint and a potential enabler is critical. Small-system scale and community engagement can foster trust and responsiveness, even as weak institutions and donor cycles undermine adaptation.

Taken together, this study advances collaborative governance theory by embedding it in the realities of low resource fragile states. It demonstrates that CG is not simply a technical arrangement but an adaptive, politically contingent process, whose success depends on fostering legitimacy, shared ownership, and institutional embedding in highly constrained environments.

6.2 Future Scope of Research

This research is not without limitations. While its single-country focus allows for in-depth analysis, comparative research across multiple fragile settings with resource constrained environment would enrich understanding of how contextual factors mediate collaborative outcomes. Moreover, while the CGR framework provides a useful structure, further integration with political economy analysis and local governance theory could enhance its explanatory power.

For future research, it is also important to explore the themes of “co-creation of value” within the context of collaboration. The processes by which value is determined—what is considered a meaningful or valuable outcome, and whose perspectives are included in the assessment—become particularly salient. These fundamental questions

warrant further inquiry through philosophical and cultural anthropological lenses, to better understand how collaborative governance navigates competing values and norms in fragile contexts. This is especially relevant to the findings of this study, where the COVID-19 Response Programme illustrates a striking divergence in perceptions of value: although the treatment facilities were never put into use, national health authorities regarded their construction as valid and meaningful, while other stakeholders questioned the programme's utility—highlighting the contested nature of value in collaborative action.

As global conversations shift toward post-2030 development agendas, this research offers timely insights into how the UN system can meet rising expectations for inclusive, accountable, and adaptive governance. Collaborative governance, when applied with clear vision, strong alignment, and genuine accountability for results, can serve as both a buffer against systemic fragility and a catalyst for inclusive, resilient development outcomes—especially in the field of child welfare. However, realizing this potential requires more than policy prescriptions. It demands sustained investment in capacity, leadership, and institutional reform—guided by a shared commitment to equity, accountability, and child-centered development. In fragile and resource-limited settings, collaborative governance is not simply a means of working together—it is a critical strategy for building responsive, inclusive, and resilient child welfare systems in an increasingly complex world.

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