
The Future of Sustainable Business Collaboration

*Trends shaping the future of collaborations
and implications for continued impact*

September 2026



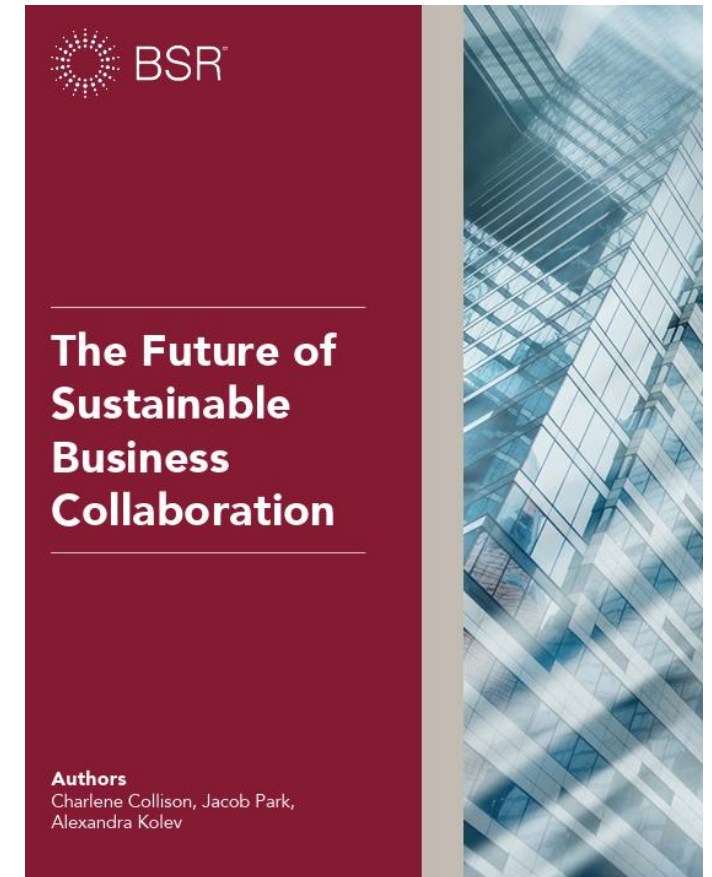
Why this report, why now?

The conditions for collaboration are shifting faster than many collaboration models were designed to handle.

This report explores how sustainable business collaboration may need to evolve over the next decade amid:

- Geopolitical Fragmentation and Instability
- Erosion and Reconfiguration of Global Coordination
- A Complex and Contradictory Regulatory Landscape
- Increasing Political and Legal Scrutiny of Collaboration
- A Changing Sustainability Landscape
- Funding Constraints and Shifting Incentives
- AI and the Transformation of Information and Interaction
- Erosion of Trust and Constraints on Human Interaction

The challenge ahead is not simply to collaborate more, but better. **How do we design collaboration that can remain effective under disruption?**



What did we learn?

Collaboration, while under pressure, remains essential but for narrower reasons.

- Collaboration is seen as **indispensable where problems are systemic, distributed, and impossible for one actor to solve alone**, especially in supply chains, policy-facing work, or broader industry transitions.
- However, it is being valued less as an intrinsic benefit and more as a **mechanism for solving specific problems**.
- Shared aspiration and broad field-building still matter, but interviewees are increasingly asking: **what exact problem is this collaboration solving, for whom, and with what leverage?**
- Mounting pressures on the current model stem from: **declining trust, an evolving regulatory environment, geopolitical uncertainty, and reduced funding**.



Where the current models fall short

Implementation Gap

- Focus has shifted from ambition and knowledge sharing to implementation on the ground.

Fragmentation and Proliferation

- Amidst many initiatives, companies are scrutinizing which deliver value and impact.

Structural constraints

- Issues limit collaboration's effectiveness (funding structures, incentive misalignment, etc.).



How the model is shifting

In response to these pressures, collaboration is already evolving.

1. **A clear shift toward more targeted, problem-specific approaches.** Rather than attempting to address broad agendas through large, diffuse platforms, organizations are increasingly forming collaborations around specific issues or value chains.
2. **Organizations are becoming more selective about participation.** Collaborative initiatives must demonstrate clear value, whether in terms of insight, influence, or practical outcomes.
3. **There is growing recognition of the importance of relational infrastructure.** Trust, facilitation, and the quality of interaction between participants are increasingly seen as central to effectiveness.
4. **A shift toward more grounded approaches.** Global collaboration, including knowledge sharing and ambition-setting, remains important but impact increasingly depends on local context and implementation.

“The collaborations I’ve seen work best are those with a very clear, specific objective.”

“The collaboration needs to provide something clear... otherwise it’s not going to work.”

“The best initiatives I’ve been part of are where we built trust.”

“Local-level projects often have more immediate impact than global initiatives.”

Designing collaboration under disruption

Core assumptions and aspects of sustainability collaboration may change significantly over the next decade.

- **Stability can no longer be assumed.**
- **Shared understanding becomes harder to maintain.**
- **Human interaction becomes both more critical and more constrained.**
- **Collaboration itself must become resilient.**
- **Power and control increasingly reside in systems and infrastructure.**
- **The scope of collaboration may narrow, even as the need expands.**
- **Core assumptions underlying collaboration are being challenged.**

Future Wild Cards | Stress-Testing Collaboration Under Disruption

The future of collaboration may be shaped not only by gradual shifts, but also by discontinuities. In addition to trends, we considered several "wild card" possibilities that would entail more abrupt and disruptive, but plausible, developments.



Agentic AI Collaboration

AI agents represent stakeholders, analyze complex systems, negotiate trade-offs, and generate solutions faster than humans can, raising questions about trust, transparency, accountability, and human oversight.



Radical Epistemic Uncertainty

Deepfakes, AI-generated actors, contested datasets, and misinformation erode confidence in facts, identities, and institutions, making shared understanding and trust far harder to establish.



Chronic and Cascading Climate Shocks

Simultaneous climate disruptions—floods, heatwaves, wildfires, drought, infrastructure failures—create a new normal of near-constant operational disruption and reactive crisis management.



Geopolitical Breakdown

Escalating conflict, sanctions, and legal restrictions fragment global collaboration, constrain cross-border engagement, and make some forms of collaboration politically or legally risky.

Welcome to our Panelists



Charlene Collison,
Managing Director,
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Mindi DeLeary
Vice President,
Responsible Sourcing
**The Estée Lauder
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Clea Kaske-Kuck
Director, Partnerships and
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**World Business Council
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Chhavi Ghuliani
Managing Director,
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BSR

Exploring Wild Cards | Stress-Testing Collaboration Under Disruption

The Scenario

What if AI becomes a participant in collaboration?

It's 2032. AI is no longer simply a tool used to support collaboration. Companies, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders increasingly use AI agents to represent their interests in collaborative processes.

These agents analyze vast amounts of data, identify areas of agreement, negotiate trade-offs, and propose solutions, allowing collaborations to reach decisions in days rather than months.

The recommendations are compelling. But **no individual participant fully understands how they were reached**, or whether every stakeholder's interests have been represented fairly.

The Challenge

Collaboration has become faster and potentially more effective, but who is actually collaborating and who is accountable for the outcome?

An aerial photograph of a dense evergreen forest, likely a spruce or fir forest, with many small, yellowish-green coniferous trees. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the image, containing text.

Q & A

We'll now answer questions participants have put into the chat.



CLOSING REFLECTIONS

One sentence each: what is **one thing** convenors, companies, or funders should do now to make collaboration more future-fit?

Designing for Disruption| Principles for future-fit collaborations

Takeaways from our research point to the need to redesign and reconfigure collaboration for sustainable business.

- **Design for disruption.**
- **Treat trust and shared understanding as critical infrastructure.**
- **Govern technology, data, and power intentionally.**
- **Design for implementation.**
- **Match the collaboration model to the challenge.**

Thank You

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