
LEARNING TO TANGO ON A TIGHTROPE: IMPLEMENTING A COLLECTIVE IMPACT APPROACH

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SUMMARY

FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS, LYSE BRUNET HAS BEEN AT THE HEART OF COLLABORATIVE community development in the province of Québec through her work at Centraide of Greater Montréal and as the first Executive Director of *Avenir d'enfants*, a \$400-million philanthropic partnership between the Québec government and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation. Looking back at this experience, Lyse notes the many similarities with the Collective Impact model and reflects on the successes and challenges of developing collaborative solutions to complex social issues.

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IT MAY HAVE BEEN A SUBCONSCIOUS INFLUENCE BY THE *CIRQUE DU SOLEIL* THAT inspired the title of this article. Choosing to use a Collective Impact approach demands not only courage in the face of risk and complexity, but also trust in its underlying logic. To date, I believe that proof of its effectiveness lies more in what we have learned than from scientific demonstrations.

Over the past 20 years, I have been associated with four large-scale Collective Impact initiatives in Montréal and the province of Québec. These projects were – and still are – supported by the two largest foundations in the province: Centraide of Greater Montréal and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, where I held senior management positions.¹ All of these initiatives were groundbreaking. Three of them – the 1,2,3 GO! early childhood initiative, neighbourhood round tables to fight poverty in Montréal, and the urban and social renewal project in the Saint-Michel district (the *Chantier de revitalisation urbaine et sociale du quartier Saint-Michel*) – were funded by Centraide. The fourth, *Avenir d'enfants*² is a partnership that was created by the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation in cooperation with the Québec government to promote early childhood development.

Two decades later, it is fascinating to recognize how these initiatives are connected and how many lessons have been passed down by the many people who played key roles over the years. Although some of these lessons were learned explicitly by reading the reflections of others as documented in written accounts, others were acquired intuitively during the countless passionate exchanges that occurred along the way. Having been at the heart of these initiatives in the role of funder, I would like to share some of the lessons learned from my experience with the added wisdom of hindsight. I will briefly describe each of the projects and, to illustrate their scope, explain the context in the province of Québec and the city of Montréal in which they evolved.

COLLECTIVE ACTION HAS A LONG HISTORY IN QUÉBEC

Québec has always been fertile ground for collective action and innovation. Its governments, organizations, and citizens have created collective resources in several sectors. This situation is partly due to Québec's position as a French-speaking nation in North America and the resulting awareness of the necessity to work together in order to have a greater impact on strategic issues. Over the course of its history, the government has become a major player in Québec society, taking a key role in redistributing wealth and setting up universal social policies. In a population of just over eight million, approximately 8,000 community organizations offer services to a wide range of people. Hundreds of organizations and associations from different sectors act collectively on various issues. We need look no further than the cooperative movement and *Centres de la petite enfance* to see the extent to which the social economy network has become an essential provider of goods and services in the province of Québec.

Although the concept of collective action is not really new, it has certainly undergone a transformation that has left it better structured and more clearly understood. Since the 1990s, under the influence of the community mobilization approach endorsed by Public Health and the integrated territorial approach supported by Québec municipalities and the Government of Québec, a growing number of initiatives chose to use a community mobilization approach to assure Collective Impact. What was new about these initiatives was that they wanted to engage both institutional and community organizations and citizens around a single objective, and to do it systematically for greater impact. People who talked about partnership, consultation, and collaboration started to talk more about integration, mobilization, and convergence.

Thanks to the efforts of several researchers who, working with participants in the field, made great strides in analyzing these complex dynamics, we now have a much clearer understanding of the concepts that characterize a Collective Impact approach and a keener knowledge of the processes involved. A codified and more clearly defined approach has led to increased competence in implementing these processes. This, however, has resulted in more demands on organizations and other less than desirable effects, such as the superimposition of mobilization structures and an avalanche of procedural and accountability requirements. In response to vociferous objections from the organizations involved over the past few years, major efforts have now been made to integrate these structures and align strategies.

At the local level, neighbourhood round tables that took on such wide-ranging issues as the fight against poverty have been able to integrate the numerous sectoral action plans required by funders and regain greater control over their actions. Funders are now better at coordinating their efforts as they seek to simplify their requirements and align their frames of reference and evaluation methodologies, which can be challenging for organizations that were built as silos and still operate as such. Other issues related to this approach, such as support and evaluation, have been subjects of lively discussion in various forums.

By supporting initiatives more closely and by pooling their resources, skills, and networks, Centraide and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation have, each in their

own way, supported and enriched projects initiated by mobilized communities, while encouraging others to follow suit. These two foundations have thus become key actors in promoting and supporting the Collective Impact approach.

FOUR GROUND-BREAKING INITIATIVES

You will recall the four initiatives mentioned at the beginning of this article: neighbourhood round tables to fight poverty in Montréal, the Saint-Michel district project, 1,2,3, GO!, and *Avenir denfants*. All of these initiatives correspond to the Collective Impact framework proposed by John Kania and Mark Kramer (Kania & Kramer 2011) and meet, to varying degrees, the five basic conditions that differentiate Collective Impact from other types of collaboration: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone support structure. These initiatives were all intent on making significant changes at the local community level.

Neighbourhood round tables to fight poverty in Montréal

In the mid-1990s, when analyses were showing concentrations of poverty in several Montréal neighbourhoods, organizations in these areas began to join forces. The configuration of poverty distribution was changing: the traditional T-shape that followed the north-south and east-west axes of the Island of Montréal was shifting toward a leopard-spot configuration across the entire territory. This realization was what prompted neighbourhood round tables to take strategic planning into their own hands, preparing portraits of their communities, identifying key issues, and targeting the most critical needs to prioritize their actions. These round tables were made up primarily of organizations from the health, education, municipal, and community sectors, sometimes including representatives from the private sector. There are currently twenty-nine neighbourhood round tables in the City of Montréal alone.

The organizations involved in the round tables began to look beyond their own individual missions in the interest of deploying a concerted action across their entire territory. Three funders committed to fighting poverty in Montréal together decided to support their actions: Centraide of Greater Montréal, the Director of Public Health, and the City of Montréal. After some ten years of discussion and many versions and approaches, they arrived at a frame of reference that satisfied both themselves and the actors in the field. I participated in many negotiations, mediations, and attempts to find common ground during those years. Every funder and every organization on the ground had its own development logic; the fact that they shared a common objective did not automatically imply that they could understand each other and agree on a joint plan of action.

The communal effort of all stakeholders to break down organizational boundaries and identify levers for change required hundreds of hours of work and dialogue. Now, 20 years later, the neighbourhood round tables are the stronger for it. What were the contributing factors? First, sufficient financial resources were made available to support the process, which entailed giving every round table the means to hire a facilitator. Second, a concerted effort was made to enable funders to speak with a single voice and build a close relationship with actors in the field. And third, a coalition of neighbourhood round tables was created, which strengthened their cohesion. It was also necessary, however, to help reinforce the individual leadership of the facilitators

in the specific role they had to play at the neighbourhood round tables, as they did not have any authority over the organizations that had entrusted them with this role. This required a very different attitude from the top-down leadership model commonly used.

It was to meet this need that my Centraide team created *Leadership rassembleur*[™] (Bridging Leadership), a training program that focused on the leader as a person. The training, which extends over several months, helps facilitators reconcile the three dimensions of their work: themselves, their organization, and their community. A decade later, this training program is still in demand, and its effects are apparent in the skills trained leaders have acquired in dealing with highly complex situations. The resources and expertise available to communities and individuals involved in a Collective Impact approach have evolved significantly. Two organizations now work full-time to provide support – evidence of the advances made in this field: Dynamo Collectivo (licensed user of the *Leadership rassembleur*[™] program) and Communagir.

The Saint-Michel neighbourhood project

One of the pilot projects that emerged from the round table process was “*Vivre Saint-Michel en santé*” (living healthy in Saint-Michel). When the Tamarack Institute wanted to invite a neighbourhood from Montréal to join its Vibrant Communities project in 2004, I decided to ask the Saint-Michel round table for two reasons:

1. This neighbourhood represented the new face of poverty in Montréal, with a large proportion of its population living under the low income cut-off, and it faced significant challenges related to social integration and cohesion. Its once homogeneous population of 55,000 was now home to newly arrived members of several different cultural communities.
2. The community had shown the ability to undertake a collective action in the 1980s. Faced with a local environmental problem, the population had joined forces to fight a battle that had strengthened the solidarity of organizations and citizens. In 1991, they created a consultation structure in the form of a neighbourhood round table that became a model of citizen leadership at the municipal level.

A further factor reinforced the other two: over the years, the people in charge of the project had gained the trust of key community leaders, and we knew we could count on their integrity and commitment.

The three objectives identified by Centraide corresponded to those of the Vibrant Communities project:

1. To give the Saint-Michel neighbourhood round table the resources it needed to intensify its fight against poverty in the form of funding, support, and access to networks and new skills. The Vibrant Communities project also gave Saint-Michel the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and exchange ideas with other organizations involved in Collective Impact approaches elsewhere in Canada.
2. To make Saint-Michel a flagship project for other neighbourhood round tables

in order to inspire and influence the dynamic of community life in Montréal. Since we didn't have the means to reproduce similar interventions with a comparable scope and intensity, we wanted to pin our hopes on this example and give it as much visibility as possible.

3. Last but not least, to provide decision-makers – at Centraide and among concerned Montréal institutions and elected government representatives – with concrete evidence of the added value of this type of approach. To achieve this goal, we took every possible opportunity to bring partners into the field, joining them in celebrating the progress being made from year to year. We created new dynamics by putting neighbourhood leaders in contact with key figures from the business and philanthropic community to help find innovative solutions to complex problems.

This action was a huge success: the Saint-Michel neighbourhood round table has become an influential model for organizations in Montréal and throughout the province of Québec.

The 1,2,3 GO! initiative

In the mid-1990s, when actions launched by neighbourhood round tables were becoming more structured, Centraide created the 1,2,3 GO! initiative to support the development of very young children (from 0-3) and their families. This approach, aimed at encouraging collaboration among organizations that offered services to children and their parents in a local community, promoted overall childhood development, support for parents, and the creation of favourable environments. The project drew its inspiration from such initiatives as the United Way's *Success By 6* in the United States and Ray Peters' *Better Beginnings, Better Futures* (Peters et al, 2003). The publication of researcher Camil Bouchard's report, *Un Québec fou de ses enfants* (Québec, a province crazy about its children) (Bouchard, 1991), one of the major drivers of the publicly funded day-care network in Québec, was also a catalyst for the 1,2,3 GO! initiative.

1,2,3 GO! was originally conceived as a five-year pilot project in six local communities in Greater Montréal. A support system was set up, with two Centraide advisors closely involved with the six initiatives, and a new development committee made up of researchers and representatives of institutions interested in the project. A research team from UQÀM (*Université du Québec à Montréal*) conducted a study to measure the initiative's impact on children and their families. This marked a significant departure from Centraide's usual method of funding community organizations on an individual basis. By inviting organizations in the field to engage in a collective action with a single large-scale objective, Centraide created a ground breaking new context.

We all assumed that in five years we would see notable changes in the lives of very young children and their families, but the findings proved otherwise. At the end of the pilot project, results showed no significant impact on either the children or their families. The study concluded that since the intervention had taken place in environments lacking in resources, it had been impossible to transform the situation in so little time. To compensate, the actions had targeted several challenges simultaneously: playground projects, transportation, parent support services, drop-in day care, et cetera.

Was the project a failure? No: we realized that it was utopian to assess results related to children after just five years of a collective action approach. The first signs of progress were in the mobilization process, which was consistent with the fact that our support had been focused on helping organizations create a common vision of change, a shared portrait of their community, and a collective plan of action.

The internal structure of certain neighbourhoods was not always conducive to setting up a rigorous Collective Impact initiative. Several factors made the dynamics more complicated than we had anticipated: unequal and inadequate resources within the organizations, power struggles, and a lack of trust among the organizations themselves. Some were uncomfortable with the fact that Centraide had taken the initiative: certain groups that were already active in early childhood services were not convinced that a Collective Impact approach would enable them to have a greater impact than they were already having on their own. Funders assumed positive outcomes, but nothing had been proven.

This experience helped us to realize that a Collective Impact approach needed time – that priceless commodity – for the dynamic to generate an impact on the children themselves. Our experience in supporting programs had shown us that a collective impact approach had to be managed differently from a program that, by definition, “programmed” the action. We had to be more flexible, bringing together a certain number of conditions in order to succeed. For example, we realized that organizations required the means to be able to devote a portion of their week to working efficiently and effectively together without having to neglect their own mission. We needed a more targeted intervention, reinforced by proven best practices. Although the support structure set up by Centraide had been unprecedented, we would ultimately need something even more robust if we were going to continue the experiment.

It was at this time that the Québec government introduced its province-wide network of affordable day care. This program singlehandedly improved conditions for many young children while giving a boost to local initiatives. When the universal government program was combined with targeted actions at the local community level, both were strengthened. When local action evolved in a context that already offered a day-care network and family-friendly public policy, any collective action was likely to have a greater impact than in a social wasteland with no service infrastructure.

When, at the end of the pilot project, it was therefore decided that the experiment should be continued, Centraide set up the *Centre 1,2,3 GO!*, a not-for-profit support organization that would henceforth be fully responsible for supporting development of these initiatives. Although Centraide would remain in the picture as a funder, it felt that externalizing the project outside of the Centraide structure would enable the initiative to operate more independently. The *Centre 1,2,3 GO!* continued the work as other initiatives were launched over the next few years until a new organization was created: *Avenir d'enfants*. A collaborative study by the main actors of the 1,2,3 GO! project and the UQÀM research team, entitled *Le projet 1,2,3 GO! - Place au dialogue - Quinze ans de mobilisation autour des tout-petits et de leur famille* (reflections on fifteen years of mobilizing communities around infants/toddlers and their families), relates the story of the 15-year adventure and provides an invaluable record of the lessons learned from the experience.

Avenir d'enfants: A province-wide initiative

In 2009, armed with this wealth of valuable experience, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation chose to continue the 1,2,3 GO! initiative by deploying a similar program but with vastly greater resources. This new initiative would use a Collective Impact approach to expand community mobilization in support of children and families throughout the entire province of Québec.

Created in 2001, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation focused its mission on preventing poverty through educational success. Taking its cue from research showing the importance of early action in children's lives, the Foundation decided to concentrate on the development of children between the ages of 0 and 5, particularly those living in poverty. It chose to devote resources to this project over a ten-year period, setting up a partnership with the Québec government to ensure that children in disadvantaged areas in all regions of the province could benefit. A joint fund of \$400 million was thus created and managed through a public-philanthropic partnership, an innovative governance model. A not-for-profit organization was subsequently established to provide funding and support for local communities: *Avenir d'enfants*.

The 1,2,3 GO! team joined forces with the new organization, bringing its expertise in providing support for local initiatives to complement the Foundation's extensive knowledge in the area of early childhood development. When *Avenir d'enfants* held its first conference some ten years after the initial creation of the 1,2,3 GO! project, I was pleasantly surprised to see that, over the years, participants had become much better equipped to speak about early childhood and more effective in their actions due to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Although this was an intuitive evaluation on my part, it has proved to be valid: over the medium term, time and experience had done their work.

Avenir d'enfants wasted no time in acquiring the tools needed to initiate a Collective Impact approach. A local community support team was set up to help communities develop their own action plans. Training within an ecosystem approach was developed and offered to organizations to assist them in the process. *Avenir d'enfants* created an environment that encouraged the exchange and sharing of knowledge on early childhood development, reactivated connections with research, and promoted the early childhood initiatives that were being developed throughout the province. A rigorous, meticulous evaluation framework was prepared, and training was developed for frontline workers to ensure that community actions were evaluated on a regular basis. Collective action on early childhood spread rapidly into 128 local communities in 16 regions of Québec, involving over 2,000 local organizations acting on behalf of 300,000 children.

This experience has taught us – and continues to teach us – a great deal. First, it has influenced social consensus on the importance of early childhood in Québec's key prevention strategies. This has been the result of the simultaneous implementation of many different elements: resources, more intense and focused action, support, evaluation, and knowledge transfer. The Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation also launched a mass social campaign, stressing the importance of early action in childhood development. Schools are increasingly taking early childhood development into account as an essential stage in a child's education: at the third edition of a Québec-wide event, which attracted

close to 1,500 participants from the educational milieu to discuss the issue of student retention, early childhood intervention was given top billing for the first time.

Avenir d'enfants is an ambitious initiative that has to juggle many complex challenges at the same time:

- a new type of governance that integrates two different cultures: philanthropy and government;
- deployment to a population of eight million living in regions and communities that are very different from one another;
- a project with funders who are also strategic actors strongly involved in governance and action;
- pursuing ambitious objectives at an intense pace; and
- strong pressure with respect to outcome measurement and evaluation.

The arrival of this public-philanthropic partnership on the Québec scene has raised certain concerns about a private foundation working so closely with the government – an arrangement that represented a new form of social intervention. It cannot be denied that such a large-scale project, with seemingly unlimited resources to devote to community mobilization, has had a significant influence on the place of early childhood on the province's social agenda. Since the creation of *Avenir d'enfants* was the initiative of funding agencies, even though most communities recognized that they were being given a unique opportunity, some felt controlled, while others – albeit a minority – have refused to participate in the project.

In the field, it was important to show a great deal of respect for organizations and communities and to recognize the value of what they had accomplished before *Avenir d'enfants* arrived on the scene. In my role as Executive Director and intent on meeting with the decision-makers involved in education, health, municipal action, and early childhood, I toured all the regions of Québec. I felt this to be a necessary step in building the kind of trust among stakeholders to ensure the success of a project of such scope. The team at *Avenir d'enfants* showed great skill in setting up a support system that was truly helpful for the associated organizations.

Although it cannot be denied that such an injection of resources had an influence on actions focused on early childhood development, occasionally disrupting local dynamics, there is also no doubt that, if we look at the experience from a long-term perspective, it was beneficial. Organizations involved in the collective action were suddenly granted resources, the likes of which they never would have received otherwise. *Avenir d'enfants* ushered in a new context in Québec that was focused on a widely accepted social objective. Thousands of parents and stakeholders were – and continue to be – mobilized while thousands of children reap the benefits.

A FEW OBSERVATIONS BASED ON MY OWN EXPERIENCE

As these four initiatives overlapped in time, the lessons each learned from the others make up a significant body of experience on collective actions in Québec. My own experience affirms everything that has been written about Collective Impact over the past several

years: it is demanding, complex, and time-consuming, requiring infinite amounts of patience, resources, and expertise. Its impact can be measured only in increments over the long term. In its early years, the Collective Impact approach inspired a moment of euphoria, as we eagerly looked forward to the prospect of bringing everything together in perfect cohesion, with the possibility of devoting substantial resources to a common cause. It is now universally agreed that the combination of convergence, aligned actions, and acquired knowledge constitutes a winning formula against duplication, silos, and competition. That may be true in theory, but in practice the results are somewhat less effective, as perfect alignment does not exist in the real world.

WE OVERVALUED THEORY AND UNDERVALUED PRACTICE

“If you want *to go fast*, go alone. If you want *to go far*, go together.” That is the mantra that has been used during the past several years to illustrate and promote the value of Collective Impact. It suggests that, in the long run, the results generated by collective action will ensure the continuity and sustainability of desired changes, because the organizations that work with the people concerned will have changed their methods of operation. In the real world, however, even if the proverb is true, the results are not always obvious. In the short term, a Collective Impact initiative often advances slowly and not very far, due to strained relationships or continuing competition among organizations, political manoeuvring, jockeying for organizational positioning, poor leadership, or insufficient drive, resources, and support.

Collective actions run up against many obstacles, and it takes time for the collective to be seen and experienced as an entity that is stronger than the sum of its parts. It takes time and commitment to take ownership of the process and move it forward. It is a long and winding road, and cruising speed depends on the initial context, background, and leadership of the organizations and individuals involved, their openness and empathy towards each other, and the role and attitude of the funder(s) in the process. In the case of collective action, time is not money; it is the essential ingredient needed to produce the desired impact.

WE DID NOT ALWAYS ACCURATELY ALIGN OUR APPROACH WITH THE TARGETED RESULT

We cannot talk about Collective Impact initiatives without talking about what we hope to achieve and on what scale and without ensuring that our approach is in line with our objectives. In short, the best approaches do not automatically tell us the best direction to take, nor do they guarantee that the desired results will be achieved. What are we aiming to change: people, living conditions, or the organizations themselves? Although these three dimensions are always present, we must determine whether our approach is appropriate based on our answer to that question. In the short term, results may be obtained faster by working directly with people in a targeted program than with a collective action approach, which will always tend to broaden the scope of the impact. These issues came up constantly as each of the initiatives described in this article strove for coherence of action – a difficult task when multiple expectations were continually competing with each other.

WE UNDERESTIMATED THE COMPLEXITY OF THE PROCESS

In an ideal world, we trust that our approach will enable us to rapidly achieve our goal. In reality, however, the discussions required to clarify issues, strategies, and objectives, combined with all the information that needs to be compiled to build a comprehensive community portrait and the tensions that have to be alleviated in order to create a positive atmosphere, are all steps in the process that seem to delay us from our goal while actually providing us with the means to achieve it.

What guarantees success is the ability of both the organizations involved and the funders to constantly balance these tensions through a clear understanding of the issues involved in this type of approach in relationship to their objectives. Failure to understand this factor leads to disappointment or incomprehension when faced with slow progress in achieving results in targeted populations. Along the way, we realized that even a collective that brought together all the conditions for success did not itself possess *all* the levers for change, and that community mobilization efforts required a great deal of time. All we could do was *contribute* to the actions of many other actors. In short, we learned from experience.

WE LEARNED HOW TO BUILD AN ORGANIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUNDERS AND ACTORS ON THE GROUND

As I am fond of saying, “If the process is going to work, there has to be someone who doesn’t think about anything else from the time they get up in the morning until they go to bed at night.” That’s the definition of a *backbone organization*. In all the initiatives I have described here, the funders played an important role in creating and supporting the backbone organization as “shareholders” in the project. This meant that their relationship to the field was no longer external, as in the traditional model, but organic as the funders were directly engaged in the project.

Both Centraide and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, each in their own way, initially played this role in order to create backbone organizations that, although independent, remained closely connected through major financial contributions and a presence on their boards of trustees. In so doing, they put distance between themselves and the newly created backbone organizations while maintaining their role as key partners. Centraide created the *Centre 1,2,3 GO!* and the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation set up *Avenir d’enfants* in partnership with the Québec government, the difference being that the *Centre 1,2,3 GO!* was not a funding organization, while *Avenir d’enfants* was both a funding and backbone support organization for the mobilized communities.

In the case of the neighbourhood round tables, funders invested recurrent core funding in order to provide them with the means of coordinating their actions by hiring a facilitator. The Saint-Michel project received support from its neighbourhood round table, Centraide, and the Vibrant Communities project, all of which helped to bring other funders on board. In Saint-Michel, leaders were able to take advantage of all these contributions to advance their objectives at their own pace, while making a few inevitable concessions to the funders.

There are many forms of backbone organizations. Funding and support functions may or may not co-exist within the same organization. Combining these two functions is an issue that has often come up for discussion: Is it possible to be a stakeholder in the process and an impartial judge of its efficacy at the same time? Depending on the attitude it adopts, the funder may be perceived and experienced by organizations on the ground as more or less of a hindrance to their autonomy. Funders can exert varying degrees of control, resulting in varying degrees of independence, accountability, trust in the field team, and levels of support. Only experience can tell which approach will work best in a given situation. One thing is sure, however, everything depends on a judicious combination of trust, efficiency, and rigour. Too much control from funders stifles the work in the field, while too much lenience and distance from the field can cause the collective action to lose momentum and direction. Since there is constant tension between these two extremes, it is essential that stakeholders understand and are able to monitor this tension, maintaining an appropriate distance from the initiative.

Within this relentless tango, a relationship develops that enables all the partners to learn together and progress together toward the target objective. In the end, it is openness to dialogue that is the guarantee of a relationship based on trust and transparency – two key conditions needed to assure the success of a Collective Impact initiative.

THE DANCE CONTINUES ...

The wealth of knowledge and skills that we have accumulated over the past 20 years is undoubtedly more impressive than we realize. The culture of mobilization is being increasingly integrated into practice. Although we are just barely beginning to have sufficient distance to be able to measure our achievements and their impact on organizations and populations, they are real:

- mobilization of citizens and parents,
- more activities for children,
- new neighbourhood resources,
- creation of links between sectors formerly working in silos,
- increased synergy among organizations,
- greater capacity for developing strategies for change,
- better integration of knowledge,
- ability to draw inspiration from best practices and adapt them as needed,
- increased competence in the area of evaluation.

Now that we have extensive experience using a Collective Impact approach, and we are better at it, the real challenge will be to find concrete evidence that implementing this approach makes a positive long-term contribution to achieving lasting change in organizations, as well as the populations concerned and their living conditions.

We have made great strides in the area of evaluation, which is increasingly used as a development tool rather than a control measure. Long-term population surveys, like the one recently used in the Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten (QSCDK) conducted by the *Institut national de santé publique du Québec* (INSPQ), enable us to measure our progress. The study in question produced a profile of the

situation in each region of the province that could subsequently be used by hundreds of teachers and partners.

The QSCDK was the result of a close collaboration between the Institut de la statistique du Québec, the Québec Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sports, the Ministry of Families, and Avenir d'enfants. The study was an excellent example of coordinated mobilization at the local, regional, and Québec-wide levels. The fact that all parties involved were able to work together for the benefit of a single cause was due in large part to the openness and attitude of the primary actors, who were intent on reaching across all barriers. On completion of the study, the INSPQ published *Les conditions de succès des actions favorisant le développement global des enfants* (Conditions for success of actions promoting overall child development), a tool designed to stimulate collective decision-making on actions to be taken.

A Collective Impact approach requires a careful combination of leadership, knowledge, skills, and resources to ensure that the organizations involved develop their initiatives in an ecosystem rather than in isolation. This kind of approach requires actions that go beyond the local level to engage government resources at all levels. The greater the connection between the levels of action, the greater the impact.

Attitudes are changing, expertise is expanding, risks have been mapped out ... we are definitely getting better at dancing this tango on a tightrope! In the face of such complexity, can we really do otherwise if we want the best for our societies?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their contributions to this article, I wish to thank Odette Viens, Vice-President, Innovation and Development, and Mario Régis, Director, Allocations and Social Analysis, Centraide of Greater Montréal, as well as Jean-Marc Chouinard, Vice-President, Strategy and Partnerships, the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation. I also wish to thank Benoît Lévesque, sociologist and Professor Emeritus at UQÀM, for his comments.

NOTES

1. At Centraide of Greater Montréal, I held the position of Vice-President, Social Development, and was the first Executive Director of *Avenir d'enfants*.
2. *Avenir d'enfants* is a non-profit organization (NPO) devoted to helping local communities throughout Québec support the overall development of children five and under living in poverty in order to ensure that every child has the same chances for a good start in life. URL: <http://avenirdenfants.org/en.aspx>.

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