
COLLECTIVE IMPACT

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SINCE ITS INTRODUCTION IN THE WINTER 2011 EDITION OF THE *STANFORD Social Innovation Review*, the theory of “Collective Impact” presented by FSG consultants John Kania and Mark Kramer (2011) has attracted considerable attention in the United States, Canada, and around the world. According to Regina Starr Ridley, Publishing Director, “‘Collective Impact’ is *SSIR*’s most viewed article with close to 300,000 page views, more than any other article *SSIR* has published.” The framework certainly has resonance with many people in the social sector, and its potential promise of fostering innovation and addressing complex social issues has spawned a virtual movement of those adopting the approach and eager to learn more. But is Collective Impact merely a re-branding of collaborative approaches that have been used for years, or does this model provide new insights and techniques that will in fact break through on some of the most intractable problems affecting western societies?

In this special issue of *The Philanthropist*, we set out to explore Collective Impact from a Canadian perspective in considerable depth and detail, and we think you will find the results to be interesting and thought provoking. Over the past year, I have had the opportunity to speak with many people to try to learn more and get a handle on Collective Impact, and I found that there was indeed a strong current of interest in the framework, along with some healthy scepticism.

In a conversation in December 2013, Tim Brodhead, former President & CEO of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, suggested that “This is really a corrective to some of the pathologies of traditional philanthropy. Most philanthropy is driven by the very personal ideas and needs of the donors, whereas Collective Impact has the potential to create more community-based solutions and approaches.” Tim thought that Collective Impact could also be a corrective to our over-reliance on government to solve problems but pointed out “that success often depends on a level of maturity and skills at the community level” and that backbone organizations must first and foremost be learning organizations dedicated to creating a sense of shared responsibility. He saw a challenge in the “centralizing tendency” of the approach, and the risk of “funders trying to avoid responsibility, or ending up exercising too much centralizing control and power.”

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FUNDING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Indeed, funding was one of the challenges we identified early on. Personally, I felt that the increasing awareness of the Collective Impact framework would be very helpful because it provides explicit recognition of the important role of backbone organizations and the need for such “infrastructure” in supporting and sustaining collaborative ventures. In “Collective Impact: Venturing on an Unfamiliar Road,” Hilary Pearson, President & CEO of Philanthropic Foundations of Canada, explores the challenges that private funders face in getting involved in Collective Impact initiatives and describes some of the experience to date in Canada, finding engagement to be limited so far due to the different and demanding nature of these projects. Cathy Mann, a fundraising consultant with more than 25 years of experience, looks at funding from the recipient’s point of view in “The Role of Philanthropy in Collective Impact.” Cathy is less optimistic than I am and feels that there are still few funders in Canada who are prepared to support backbone infrastructure. In her article she explores current approaches to fundraising for Collective Impact and concludes that many of the basic principles still apply.

EVOLUTIONARY, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

Collaboration has become common in the nonprofit sphere and is encouraged by funders as a response to the complexity and interdependence of social issues as well as the scarcity of resources. But herein lies a common misunderstanding: Collaboration is not about eliminating duplication – indeed true collaboration demands more of its participants because it requires them to work together in different ways, some of which may in fact require additional resources and effort. And collaboration is just the starting point: Collective Impact is really all about how to get from collaboration to collective action.

I call Collective Impact evolutionary, not revolutionary, in that it very much builds on extensive experience over decades of the arduous and complex work of creating transformative change at the community level. Along with FSG, particular credit is often given to Anne Kubisch, who led the Aspen Institute’s Roundtable on Community Change for many years, the work championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the principles of Asset-Based Community Development developed by John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann. In conversation, John Kania has stated that Collective Impact “is squarely in the systems change category” and suggested in our interview that “the five conditions of Collective Impact gave language to what many people already intuitively knew, but in a way where we can now have consistent conversations about this work, and people understand what it takes to do this work in a rigorous way.”

In our opening article, *The Promise and Peril of Collective Impact*, Liz Weaver, Vice President at the Tamarack Institute, reflects on Collective Impact from her experience with Vibrant Communities and other anti-poverty initiatives. Liz provides a detailed description and explanation of the conditions and pre-conditions that are needed to effectively implement Collective Impact, which she believes holds the promise for progressive and substantial community impact at scale, but she

also points out the perils in misapplying or mismanaging the labels and concepts, underfunding the initiatives, and not recognizing the essential long-term nature of the approach. Liz has suggested that Collective Impact is “deceptively simple” and that initiatives will take a minimum of five to ten years to mature.

Collective Impact is drawing on prior experience in other ways, as people struggle with the challenges of guiding and managing such initiatives. A case in point is governance because, in many ways, it requires new and different ways of thinking as described in a number of our articles. Interestingly, the path in search of governance for Collective Impact has led Liz Weaver and others to circle back a few years to the Constellation Model of Collaborative Social Change, described by Toronto-based Tonya Surman in a June 2006 paper, *Constellation Collaboration: A Model for Multi-organizational Partnership* (2006) for the Centre for Social Innovation and emerging from her experience going back to 2001 with the Canadian Partnership for Children’s Health and Environment. Further developed in partnership with Mark Surman, Tonya took the model to the network level in 2007 as Co-Founder of the Ontario Nonprofit Network and continues to be a leading figure in the field of social innovation. I think this example nicely illustrates the spirit of inquiry and appreciation that infuses the Collective Impact movement, which could be characterized by Isaac Newton’s famous protest; “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

FROM COMMUNITY IMPACT TO COLLECTIVE IMPACT

My own background is primarily with United Way Centraide organizations, and I was intrigued, though not surprised, to discover that United Way is embracing the Collective Impact framework as the latest iteration of its community impact mission. In its June 2012 white paper *Charting a Course for Change: Advancing Education, Income and Health through Collective Impact*, United Way Worldwide set out its ambitious goals for 2018, and President and CEO Brian Gallagher explicitly called for a Collective Impact approach in his opening letter: “Of course, United Ways can’t do it alone. We must work with our community partners. Together, we must tap into people’s aspirations, focus on issues and underlying conditions for change, and bring people and organizations together to create collective impact.”

In Mark Kramer’s foreword to *Charting a Course for Change* (2012), he states that “United Way Worldwide is well positioned to lead this sort of cross-sector endeavour, and this report is a good starting point...” He goes on to conclude that:

When United Ways create and sustain collective impact they redefine their role in the community – truly becoming the backbone of community change efforts. It is not merely an opportunity for United Ways to take on this role – it is a necessity if we are to meet the urgent challenges our society faces today. Collective impact will bring renewed vitality to United Ways, enabling them to strengthen their communities in ways we have never before seen. This vision, I believe, can – and must – become the United Way of the future.

United Way Australia is enthusiastically embracing the Collective Impact framework, adopting the language and approach and engaging actively with the Centre for Social Impact to share knowledge and ideas. In the foreword to their 2012 Community Impact Report *Collaborating for Community Impact*, CEO Doug Taylor reports that “Like all organizations investing and engaged in social impact, we are learning. This is particularly the case for United Way as we pioneer new forms of collaboration increasingly referred to as Collective Impact which presents another important dimension of work to be closely evaluated” (United Way Australia, 2012).

In this special issue, we feature two articles that relate stories about United Way Centraide experience here in Canada. In a deep reflection on more than 25 years of working with collaborative community development projects in Québec, Lyse Brunet describes her experience at Centraide du Grand Montréal and Le Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon in *Apprendre à danser le tango sur un fil de fer: agir selon une approche d’impact collectif (Learning to Tango on a Tightrope: Implementing a Collective Impact Approach* – We are pleased to provide an English translation for this French language article.) At Centraide Lyse was directly involved with three large-scale Collective Impact initiatives focused on creating change at the community level in Montréal. As the first executive director of *Avenir d’enfants*, Lyse was at the heart of developing an innovative program that used a Collective Impact approach to community mobilization in support of young children and their families throughout Québec. In creating a \$400 million public-philanthropic partnership with the Québec government, this program was not without controversy, but it firmly established the importance of early childhood development and intervention in Québec and ultimately supported 128 local communities in 16 regions, engaging more than 2,000 local organizations acting on behalf of 300,000 children.

In *United Way and Success By 6: Growing up with Collective Impact*, Michael McKnight and Deborah Irvine from United Way of the Lower Mainland provide a retrospective analysis of the 11-year history of a province-wide collaborative approach to early childhood development in British Columbia that successfully engaged the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. Of particular importance are more than 100 Early Years Councils and Aboriginal Councils that support over 500 communities, a level of community engagement that has completely changed the paradigm of delivering province-wide services and has become a model for other initiatives. Their analysis also provides concrete examples of policy and systems change that resulted directly from the Collective Impact approach.

CREATING INNOVATION

Innovation has been a pre-occupation of many in the social sector for some time now, and another aspect of Collective Impact that I found intriguing was its promise of fostering innovation in dealing with complex and “wicked” problems. This is achieved in several ways that are described by Kania, Kramer, and their colleagues in the original *SSIR* articles. One way is through cross-sectoral engagement, which tries to get all of the parties to the same table, many talking together for the first time. Many of the articles in this issue touch on the ways in which Collective

Impact can create new ideas and approaches. While the initiative predates Collective Impact theory, Roisin Reid does a thorough job in *The Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement: Unlikely Allies Pursuing Conservation and Sustainable Development in Canada's Boreal Regions* of applying a retrospective analysis to examine how this unique agreement came about and how the initiative is taking a very different approach by getting environmentalists and forestry companies working together.

EVALUATING COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Evaluation plays a key role in Collective Impact initiatives, both as part of the immediate feedback loop from shared measurement, which is critical in identifying and encouraging innovation, as well as to measure the long-term effectiveness of these projects.

Ted Jackson, Associate Professor in the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University, is a recognized expert in evaluation and suggested to me in a conversation in March 2014 that we needed to take a long-term view:

My own view is that Collective Impact needs a good 10 years of implementation for the sector to really understand what it offers and how to do it well. Fifteen or twenty years would be even better. But for Collective Impact to embed itself in the nonprofit sector deeply enough to be tested over 10 years – to have sufficient staying power and resilience as a new paradigm – it will have to address not just the learning dimensions of evaluation, but also the accountability dimensions. That is to say, when the parties to a Collective Impact initiative establish results targets and indicators, and theories of change, it is not good enough for them to “slide” off those targets and theories in the name of complexity, learning and innovation – and onto new ones. What is needed is for the collaborators to be held accountable for achieving their original targets and theories, while still adjusting their initiative as they proceed forward. I’m a little concerned that taking a purely developmental evaluation approach, which has many strengths, could result in marginalizing the accountability function. If that happens, funders won’t stay in the game, nonprofits won’t improve, and the Collective Impact approach itself will wither, unfulfilled.

In order to explore this important aspect of Collective Impact in more detail, we invited Mark Cabaj, who has been involved in evaluating programs and social change initiatives since 1994 and was an “early adopter” of developmental evaluation, to write about the challenges in *Evaluating Collective Impact: Five Simple Rules*. Don’t be fooled by the title: Based on his considerable expertise and experience, Mark provides a very detailed and comprehensive explanation of five significant evaluation issues that potentially affect all Collective Impact endeavours, and we believe that his critical analysis and original thinking is an important contribution to the field.

SHARED MEASUREMENT

Closely related to evaluation, the shared measurement condition of Collective Impact is both critical and challenging. In its simplest form, shared measurement involves agreeing on which indicators participants will contribute to and monitor in order to assess progress towards the agreed goal. But as Kania and Kramer suggested in *Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Embraces Complexity* (2013), it is the process itself of engaging participants in collective action, focusing attention and resources, and revealing which strategies and activities are actually working that is so critical to creating real change. Kania pointed out in a recent interview with *The Philanthropist* that shared measurement is often misunderstood because people focus on collecting quantitative indicator data, but that they need to also focus on learning and look at the “why” through continuous communication.

In his article *Community Knowledge: The Building Blocks of Collective Impact*, Lee Rose, Director, Community Knowledge at Community Foundations of Canada, suggests a potential solution to the problem of the cost and complexity of shared measurement that Mark Cabaj identifies. Drawing on experience with *Vital Signs* and other collaborative community-wide data sharing approaches, Lee asserts that in many cases the required data already exists in the community, but that the real power of community knowledge is found in our ability to organize and interpret this data to give it new meaning and value.

BUILDING CAPACITY

There has been tremendous interest in learning about Collective Impact, and Tamarack is engaged in a partnership with the Aspen Institute and FSG to provide resources and support for initiatives and practitioners. The first *Champions for Change – Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact* conference in Canada was convened by Tamarack in Toronto in May 2013 and attracted 141 participants. This year’s conference in Vancouver in April 2014 had 247 people registered and was sold out with a waiting list. Related workshops developed by Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver on *Evaluating Community Impact: Capturing and Making Sense of Community Outcomes* will be held in Halifax and Winnipeg in 2014 and are already full to capacity with 100 participants and more than 20 people on the waiting list. Paul Born, Liz Weaver, Mark Cabaj, and other Tamarack associates are busy responding to an increasing number of requests for workshops and speaking engagements focusing on numerous aspects of Collective Impact.

Innoweave, an award-winning collaborative capacity building program designed and delivered by the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, SiG, and more than 150 partners from all sectors across Canada, has added new workshops and resources to help groups of community organizations develop Collective Impact initiatives. Drawing from this experience, Aaron Good and Doug Brodhead wrote *Innoweave and Collective Impact: Collaboration is just the Beginning*, which describes why Innoweave added a Collective Impact module to its offerings and what it hopes

to achieve, citing examples of organizations that are successfully using Collective Impact to tackle complex problems.

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

While we are primarily bringing a Pan-Canadian perspective to our inquiry, we were also cognizant that Collective Impact has generated worldwide interest and attention, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Australia, where the Centre for Social Innovation and United Way Australia have played a leading role in exploring the potential of Collective Impact. Key to this process have been two veterans of many social change initiatives, Kerry Graham and Dawn O’Neil, who have taken the lead in researching Collective Impact in the Australian context. We are fortunate to have just caught them in the “afterglow” of Australia’s first-ever Collective Impact conference in February 2014, and in *Collective Impact: The Birth of an Australian Movement* they reflect on their findings and suggest that now is the time for a transformational “step” change to address marginalization and significant disadvantage. They both believe that the Collective Impact framework offers an opportunity for cross-sectoral collaboration to create innovation and systems change in Australia, and that they are witnessing and fostering the birth of a movement.

POINT/COUNTERPOINT

Given the questions and scepticism about Collective Impact, it made sense for us to renew a popular feature from previous issues and invite Don Bourgeois, an advocate, writer, and former editor of *The Philanthropist*, and Paul Born, President of the Tamarack Institute, to face off on the question of whether Collective Impact is a new and innovative approach or merely a re-packaging of existing ideas about collaboration. The resulting commentary sets out the issues in an entertaining but serious way to round out the debate.

Q&A WITH JOHN KANIA AND FAY HANLEYBROWN

Although we were primarily interested in a Canadian perspective, we were delighted to have the opportunity to interview two of the leading voices on Collective Impact, John Kania and Fay Hanleybrown of FSG, when they participated in the most recent *Champions for Change: Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact* conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, in April 2014. In a conversation with Liz Weaver from Tamarack, John and Fay were generous with their comments as they described their latest experience and thinking about the Collective Impact phenomenon. It is particularly appropriate to conclude this special issue with their reflections on differences in approach between the United States and Canada and their interpretation of nuances in implementation as they continue to learn about “what it takes to do this work in a rigorous way.”

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

One of the themes that I heard frequently throughout this inquiry into Collective Impact was the desire to learn from each other, and I was delighted to find that this spirit infuses Tamarack and FSG as well. In our interview with John Kania and Fay Hanleybrown, they both emphasized how enthusiastic they were about the recent launch of a Collective Impact Forum, an online community designed to invite “collective impact practitioners and those interested in collective impact – from nonprofits, to funders, to people in government, to business leaders, and others – to come together to share challenges, problem-solve, and learn from each other.” Seventeen hundred members have already joined the forum in the first month and more than 100 resource documents have been uploaded.

Tamarack has launched its own Community of Practice for Collective Impact practitioners and freely shares resources through its website and online communities. In addition to an active program of workshops scheduled across the Canada, the big news is the Collective Impact Summit to be held October 6-10 in Toronto. Designed as a hands-on learning event for practitioners and others interested in Collective Impact, the Summit will feature many of the leading thinkers from Canada and the United States in a five-day interactive conference.

As many of our authors have suggested, we look forward to continuing the conversations in communities across Canada and in future issues of *The Philanthropist*. As the African proverb suggests, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” That pretty much sums up Collective Impact for me.

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