

# Building Collective Impact Capacity | Why Now?

*Sylvia Cheuy*

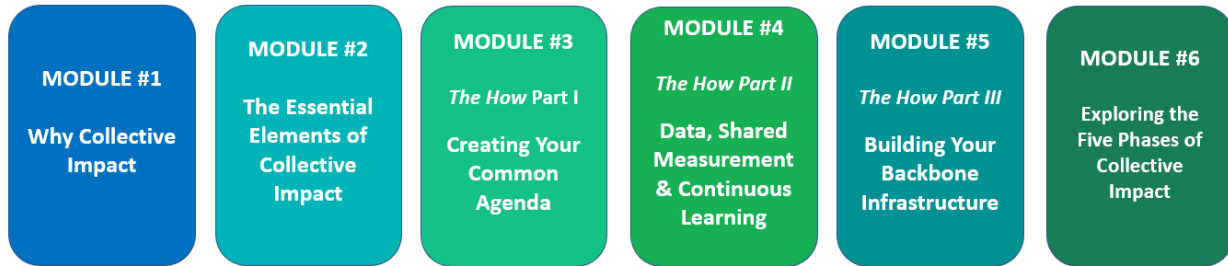
## Introduction

Communities have had to navigate tremendous change and disruption for the past eighteen months as we have worked to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. This reality has demonstrated the resilience of those communities that have built the capacity to come together across sectors to coordinate a comprehensive and coordinated response. Collaboration, between different sectors and between organizations, government, and community leaders is increasingly common but is still not the dominant way that most of us get things done. However, multisector collaboration – which is the foundation of the Collective Impact framework – is essential to effectively respond to new and unanticipated situations.

Over the past decade, the lessons learned from changemakers using the Collective Impact (CI) framework to address complex social and environmental issues has demonstrated that effectively implementing CI requires more than just a knowledge of Collective Impact theory. The successful development of a CI Initiative also benefits from tools and resources that facilitate partners' ability to learn and think together to reveal new ideas about what is possible.

Tamarack has spent close to twenty years supporting and learning from Collective Impact initiatives who share a common commitment to reduce poverty simultaneously at both the local and national levels. Our Learning Centre is known for our ability to provide changemakers from around the world with tools, support, and examples that make the work of Collective Impact simpler and more effective. This Fall, we are happy to be adding a self-directed, virtual Foundations of Collective Impact course that allows participants to move at their own pace. This course includes access to a comprehensive Collective Impact Toolkit and provides monthly coaching sessions to provide tailored advice in how this learning can be applied to develop – or strengthen – Collective Impact Initiatives. The course curriculum weaves together a focused look at both the Collective Impact framework along with tools we have found effective to facilitate its implementation. Key ideas explored in the curriculum are highlighted below.





## Collective Impact | A Framework to Strengthen Community Resilience

Uniting a diversity of perspectives is exactly what is needed to make sense of the rapidly changing world around us and enable us to co-design and prototype new approaches. A community's capacity to mobilize various leaders to take effective action and seize new opportunities demonstrates resilience – the ability to bounce-back after a set-back or respond to emerging opportunities. The strength of the Collective Impact framework is that it provides a proven approach for how this can be achieved.



**The strength of the Collective Impact framework is that it provides a proven approach for high-impact results.**



The simplicity and clarity of the Collective Impact framework is part of its appeal. It outlines an approach that is clear and understandable and provides an effective roadmap to advance positive change. The challenge of Collective Impact, as practitioners have discovered, is that despite the CI Framework's clarity, it is NOT a simple recipe. That is because figuring out how best to apply the framework to a specific issue, in ways that respects the uniqueness of a community, is as much an art as it is a science. It involves an iterative approach shaped by community input, feedback, sensemaking and experimentation. Fortunately, a rich and robust practice has been created by the thousands of early adopters of the Collective Impact framework. This knowledge is invaluable to those newer to CI framework, enabling them to accelerate the effectiveness of your own Collective Impact strategy and action plan.

## Collective Impact | One of Five Interconnected Practices to Advance Community Change

Tamarack's experience in community change has clarified for us the importance of building capacity within five interconnected practices, including Collective Impact, to advance lasting community change. These five practices are at the heart of our Theory of Change.

The five interconnected practices of community change are:

1. **Collective Impact:** How can we mobilize collaboration across sectors for systems change?
2. **Community Engagement:** How can we engage community members to create and realize bold visions for the future?
3. **Collaborative Leadership:** How can we bring the right people together in constructive ways?
4. **Community Innovation:** How can we create, test, and scale new approaches?
5. **Evaluating Impact:** How can we identify, amplify, and share what we are learning about what works?



The interconnectedness to these practices has demonstrated for us the reality that the three pre-conditions and five conditions that make up the Collective Impact framework are essential AND are strengthened by the other four practices to develop a shared Collective Impact action plan. Seasoned community change practitioners should not hesitate to draw upon their knowledge and skills with these other practices in creating their Collective Impact initiative.

## Beyond the Framework | An Invitation to Think Differently

The magic of Collective Impact lies in its ability to create the conditions for diverse leaders to think together – differently. As these leaders come together, they develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of their shared issue. This enables them to discover possible opportunities and solutions that can strengthen and align their individual efforts. This often requires these leaders to shift their own mindsets and move beyond the day-to-day, “business as usual,” approaches that are familiar and typically generated by sector-specific change efforts. Three mindset shifts that increase the likelihood that a Collective Impact initiative can generate transformational change are:

1. **Reframing the Nature of the Problem** – Collective Impact initiatives are more robust when they are designed with an appreciation of the dynamic and complex nature of their issue as well as a shared willingness to adapt the shared action plan in response to these conditions.
2. **Refocusing on Programmatic and Systems Change Strategies** – Programs and services are the traditional approach that organizations use to respond to community issues. Those who rely on these programs and services certainly need them to continue. At the same time, those who are most impacted by these issues also know first-hand that alone, such approaches, are limited in their ability to effectively address the root causes that contribute to their challenges.

One of the early wins of the Collective Impact approach is that it facilitates better alignment across, existing services. This often makes these services more coordinated and easier to access. However, successful Collective Impact initiatives have discovered that increasing their impact beyond these early wins to create transformational impact requires them to intentionally identify and develop complementary strategies, to address existing systemic barriers that are helping to “hold an issue in place”.

- 3. Reimagining Leadership** – Those closest to an issue are often the ones who hold the most knowledge about possible solutions for addressing it. Leadership of effective Collective Impact initiative therefore requires ensuring that these “context experts” with lived and living experience of the issue share leadership with the subject-matter experts to develop effective solutions that work in the real world. To reimagine what leadership looks like in a Collective Impact initiative, the sharing of leadership between organizational and community leaders is required. This facilitates the ability for a CI Initiative to be designed in ways that increases the likelihood that they will become a catalyst that can mobilize their entire community to become involved and willing to contribute to being part of the solution.

When the mindset shifts are embraced in the implementation of the Collective Impact Framework, it is more likely that the approach will achieve its full promise and impact.

## Assessing Community Readiness for Collective Impact

Once community leaders confirm that Collective Impact is the right approach to advance your community change agenda, they must assess the readiness of their own community to join them in their collaborative effort. The three preconditions of Collective Impact – engaging influential leaders, assessing the sense of urgency about their issue, and mobilizing resources – offer a helpful set of criteria to identify and prioritize the groundwork required to build awareness and interest to engage interested stakeholders in providing input and feedback on the initiative’ action plan as it evolves.

### 5 Questions to Assess the Fit of Collective Impact

1. Do we aim to effect a needle-change (i.e., 10% or more) on a community wide metric?
2. Do we believe a long-term (3-5 + year) investment is needed by diverse stakeholders to achieve success?
3. Do we believe cross-sector engagement is essential for community-wide change?
4. Are we committed to using measurable data to set the agenda and improve over time?
5. Are we committed to having community members as leaders, partners & producers of impact?

*Source: The White House Council on Community Solutions*

The groundwork to launching a Collective Impact initiative can include gathering data and reviewing previous reports to help make the case that action is needed; raising public awareness about your focus issue; growing the commitment to support action with an expanding network of sector and community leaders; and mobilizing both the financial and in-kind resources to support a set of community dialogues to reach consensus around a shared community aspiration and action plan for the Collective Impact initiative.

## Identifying Strategies to Accelerate Success and Impact

One of the unique characteristics of Collective Impact initiatives is that, unlike more traditional approaches to addressing social issues, rarely if ever is there a pre-determined or “best” practice that outlines what and how to apply the framework to a group’s specific issue. In fact, much of the early work to launch a Collective Impact initiative is focused on the collaborative development of what the initiative’s champions have come to learn as the best way to move forward. This way of working often feels unfamiliar and considerably more uncertain or risky than our experience of relying on a proven approach. This reality highlights the importance of both the continuous communication and shared measurement conditions within the Collective Impact framework.

**“Communication is the lifeblood of high-impact, vital Collective Impact initiatives. It nurtures momentum and long-term sustainability.”**

A commitment to continuous communication among the leadership of a Collective Impact initiative helps identify insights and signals about how well the action plan is working and/or whether there is a need to refine or rethink the group’s initial assumptions. The continuous communication condition also highlights the importance of planning for regular efforts to celebrate progress as well as gather more feedback and input from a broader cross-section of the community. The continuous communication condition also helps to attract additional partners, funding, and resources to the initiative over time, which is essential given the

long-term nature of Collective Impact work. The lesson here is that a Collective Impact initiative’s action plan is a “living document” that requires a willingness to gather insights and feedback continuously to ensure the plan remains focused on achieving progress and impact. Communication is the lifeblood of high-impact, vital collective impact initiatives and nurtures momentum and long-term sustainability.

The shared measurement condition brings a discipline to a Collective Impact initiative by encouraging a commitment as well as the necessary processes to enable its leaders to monitor the pulse and progress of their shared work. Successful Collective Impact initiatives use data from their shared indicators to track their progress over time and promote a culture and commitment to ongoing reflection and learning that is particularly important when so much of the initiative's work is focused on innovating new, yet unproven, approaches aimed at complementing and strengthening existing programs and supports.

Intentional investment in capacity-building that is focused specifically on Collective Impact is another important strategy for accelerating success and impact in this work. This may include paid learning opportunities, however, investing time to participate in free learning opportunities to connect with thought-leaders as well as peer practitioners has also proven to be an important ingredient in successful CI initiatives.

## The Future of Collective Impact

As the field of Collective Impact matures, new opportunities are emerging for better alignment and synergy of Collective Impact initiatives which may be addressing different issues within the same geography. This can include informal and/or more structured peer learning opportunities as well as the opportunity to explore how these initiatives can be mutually supportive, or even collaborate on overlapping issues and opportunities when it makes sense.

There is a related opportunity for Collective Impact initiatives that are focused on the same issue but operating at different scales. They can link up and support each other's strategies as well as align their individual efforts to achieve greater profile, impact, and success. There is growing awareness of the value that a field-building catalyst can support the practice of Collective Impact to be effective. The work of the field-building catalyst provides support to Collective Impact initiatives by playing four, interconnected roles. These include:

1. **Capacity Building** – By providing learning opportunities and resources that strengthen the knowledge and capacity of Collective Impact initiatives
2. **Facilitating Peer Learning** – The field-building catalyst provides leadership to support the convening and linking of Collective Impact initiatives to make it easier for them to learn and support each other as well as identify opportunities to work together
3. **Engaging System Leaders** – A field-building catalyst plays a valuable role in championing the work – and learning of – Collective Impact initiatives to key system leaders and funders by drawing attention to achievements of individual Collective Impact Initiatives; highlighting the growing network of CI Initiatives who are linking together around a common issue and facilitating investment

- 4. Supporting the Creation of Enabling Environments** – The final valuable role that they contribute to is the sharing of learning opportunities between issue-focused Collective Impact networks and system leaders. These events emphasize opportunities for the development of joint or complementary solutions which can be prototyped and scaled. These events support relationship building between important actors and contributes to the creation of enabling environments that amplify success on a shared issue of concern.

Tamarack has had the privilege of acting as a field-building catalyst throughout our history. This experience has helped us to deeply appreciate that, while each role provides an important contribution that strengthens local Collective Impact initiatives, the true impact of a field-building catalyst lies in not only having capacity in all four roles, but also the ability and knowledge to seamlessly flow between them as required. As the practice of Collective Impact matures and the number of Collective Impact initiatives grows, we anticipate that role of field-building catalysts and their contributions to the efforts of Collective Impact initiatives will become increasingly recognized.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Sylvia Cheuy** – Sylvia is the Consulting Director in Collective Impact with the Tamarack Institute. She is passionate about community change and believes that when the assets of residents and organizations are connected, they become powerful drivers of community change. Prior to joining Tamarack, Sylvia was the founding Executive Director to Headwaters Communities in Action (HCIA), a grassroots citizen initiative fostering collaborative leadership and action to advance a long-term vision of well-being for Ontario's Headwaters region. This experience gives Sylvia practical knowledge and firsthand experience in what it takes to engage and mobilize positive community change. Sylvia completed her undergrad at the University of Toronto and a graduate diploma in Social Innovation at the University of Waterloo in 2013 where she explored opportunities to reimagine regional food systems.



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