Learnings From 10 Years of Collective Impact

Sylvia Cheuy

Introduction

It's hard to believe that it's been a decade since the debut of Collective Impact (CI) as a framework. John Kania and Mark Kramer of FSG: Social Impact Consultants launched a world-wide field of practice when their article **Collective Impact** was published in the Winter 2011 issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review. The paper defined Collective Impact as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem." It also outlined three pre-conditions and five conditions that offered a simple yet powerful framework for how a network of multi-sector partners could work collectively towards a common goal and achieve powerful results together. One measure of how quickly Collective Impact has been embraced by practitioners world-wide is that Kania and Kramer's original Collective Impact paper is the most downloaded article in the history of the Stanford Social Innovation Review. It currently has more than one million downloads and 2,400 academic citations to date.

To mark Collective Impact's 10-year anniversary, the Collective Impact Forum spoke with partners and colleagues about how best to highlight this moment in time – particularly given the unprecedented changes now being experienced in communities due to COVID-19 and how it has amplified historic inequities. This has resulted in a special online series, Collective Impact, 10 Years Later, that includes articles from the Collective Impact Forum, the Stanford Social Innovation Review and practitioners and other partners – including Tamarack – who have been adapting and advancing the practice of Collective Impact over the past 10 years.

Centering Equity in Collective Impact	Reflecting on Collective Impact for Place-Based Social Change	10 Dangers to Collective Impact	Data in Collective Impact: Focusing on What Matters	Interview: Bringing an Anti-Racist Approach to Collective Impact
Author(s): John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer & Jennifer Splansky Juster	Author(s): Melody Barnes, Jennifer Blatz, Geoffrey Canada, Rosanne Haggerty & Erik Stegman	Author(s): Paul Schmitz	Author(s): Justin Piff	Author(s): Zea Malawa & Miya Cain

Using Data to Disrupt Systemic Inequity	Centering Racial Justice and Grassroots Ownership in Collective Impact	Power and Collective Impact in Australia	How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact
Author(s): Jennifer Blatz	Author(s): Kat Allen, Rachel Stoler, Keyedrya Jacobs, Ilana Gerjuoy, Sage Shea & Leigh-Ellen Figueroa	Author(s): Kerry Graham, Liz Skelton & Mark Yettica Paulson	Author(s): Sylvia Cheuy, Mark Cabaj & Liz Weaver

This article highlights insights from the other articles that have been released so far as part of this series and invites you to consider how they might inform the design and implementation of your own Collective Impact initiative. Before highlighting the articles in the series, this article will first provide a brief overview of 5 key publications within the last 10 years, with an emphasis of showcasing the evolution of Collective Impact.

Key Milestones in the Evolution of Collective Impact

To provide context to the CI Framework's unprecedented popularity, it is useful to note how the practice has evolved over time. The key milestones listed below demonstrate that Collective Impact is not a simple recipe that guarantees success. Rather, CI is a shared way to explore complex issues and experiment with jointly created new solutions. Five of these milestones are:

1. Collective Impact Principles of Practice – These eight principles were developed in 2016. They emphasize what is important about HOW Collective Impact is implemented and were developed by the Collective Impact Forum and their co-catalyst partners, of which Tamarack is one. They reflect insights from the field and are considered an essential complement to the Collective Impact Framework.

2. Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change – This highly-referenced paper was co-authored by Liz Weaver and Mark Cabaj in 2016. It proposes important upgrades to the five conditions of Collective Impact and offers readers a richer perspective on the work of implementing the CI Framework.

3. The Field-Wide Evaluation of Collective Impact – This 2018 evaluation reviewed 25 different Collective Impact initiatives at varying levels of maturity, including two from Canada. The evaluation's findings also confirmed the Collective Impact framework's capability of systems and population changes, although this varied between the 25 sites studied.

4. The Water of Systems Change – The 2018 paper The Water of Systems Change draws attention to the importance of intentionally and strategically addressing systems barriers and advancing systemic solutions in the work of Collective Impact.

Key Milestones in the Evolution of Collective Impact

Collective Impact Principles of Practice
Collective Impact Forum
2016

Collective Impact 3.0
Liz Weaver & Mark Cabaj
2016

The Field-Wide Evaluation of Collective Impact
Collective Impact Forum
2018

The Water of Systems Change
John Kania, Mark Kramer & Peter Senge
2018

Evolving the Practice of Collective Impact: Inspiration from the Field
Sylvia Cheuy
2020

€ TAMARACK
I N S T I T U T E

5. [Evolving the Practice of Collective Impact: Inspiration from the Field](#) – This paper, which I authored in 2020, profiles successful examples of Collective Impact at the neighbourhood, community-wide, and national scales. This highlights the versatility of the framework and brings to light an emerging field-wide challenge of aligning the efforts of multiple Collective Impact initiatives and how it is best done.

10 Years Later | A New Definition of Collective Impact

The 10th anniversary of Collective Impact marks an interesting time in the field. We continue to see a significant number of practitioners being introduced to the framework or are in the early days of implementing a CI Initiative. At the same time, there is a network of practitioners who have significant experience and powerful insights about what is needed to build and sustain a successful CI Initiative. Their focus is now on how to steward and renew a mature CI initiative. At this important moment in the evolution of Collective Impact, Tamarack would like fellow- practitioners to join us in reflecting on experiences implementing the framework and sharing insights and ideas about what is needed to ensure the practice remains robust and ready to face the challenges of today. The Collective Impact: 10 Years Later series offers a good place to start.

The first article in the series, ***Centering Equity in Collective Impact***, is co-authored by John Kania and Mark Kramer along with Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, and Jennifer Splansky Juster. The most important take-away from this article is a revised definition of Collective Impact:

> **Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change.**

This revised definition explicitly identifies equity as "the North Star for why and how Collective Impact work takes place…" and reflects the co-authors' own personal and professional journeys with Collective Impact, which includes their shared realization that "the single greatest reason why Collective Impact efforts fall short is a failure to center equity."

The emphasis on equity at the heart of this new definition of Collective Impact recognizes the importance of championing targeted actions that "create policies, practices, and institutions that address current and historical inequities" to enable communities to achieve their full potential. This new definition of Collective Impact has implications for how practitioners implement the Framework.

A review of CI Initiatives that are making progress centering equity in their work have identified five strategies that the co-authors suggest are critical to the goal of advancing equity. The five strategies are:

1. **Ground the work in data, context, and target solutions** – This strategy begins with developing a new, shared understanding of the realities and narratives of equity and how biases affect our ability to collectively generate and implement appropriate solutions

2. **Focus on Systems Change in Addition to Programs and Services** – When considering the work of systems change, this strategy links to the three levels of explicitness identified in the Water of

Systems Change framework and the importance of systems strategies in generating lasting solutions. It also includes the recognition that, while systems change is long-term work, it must be balanced with efforts to enhance and expand programs and services that meet people's needs in the present

3. **Shift Power Within the Collaborative** – This strategy focuses on ensuring that institutional and community leaders share decision-making power, both within and beyond their Collective Impact initiative, by intentionally fostering practices that nurture an inclusive culture

4. **Listen To and Act with Community** – This strategy emphasizes the importance of engagement and trust with those impacted by the issue of a Collective Impact issue. Working with, and leveraging the strengths of community ensures the results of CI initiatives is more equitable and transformative

5. **Build Equity, Leadership, and Accountability** – This strategy recognizes the value of ensuring that leadership throughout CI Initiatives reflects the diversity of those who the effort serves. It also recognizes the importance of holding everyone involved in the CI Initiative accountable for progress in advancing equity both personally and organizationally

Together, these five strategies call CI practitioners to be more inclusive about who is leading the work and intentionally nurture understanding and trust between diverse leaders so that the dynamics and culture of leadership within the CI Initiative explicitly works to address imbalances in power. The article [Bringing an Anti-Racist Approach to Collective Impact](#) profiles two Collective Impact initiatives that are effectively centering equity in their approach to achieving lasting social change.

Recognizing the Power of Place in Collective Impact

The article ***[Reflecting on Collective Impact for Place-Based Social Change](#)*** is an interview with the leaders of four long-standing Collective Impact initiatives. This piece explores how the uniqueness of place influences the design of a Collective Impact initiatives and shares thoughts about the future of Collective Impact.

The insights shared by these experienced Collective Impact leaders include:

- **Expect the Work to Be Hard** – Not only is the work difficult it rarely gets easier over time. One reason for this is that the dynamics within community are always changing. Another source of difficulty is the tension between people's impatience to see results and the reality that producing high impact, lasting results is long-term work. A third reality that makes Collective Impact work difficult is that those leading the work are not separate from it and therefore the changes they are calling for impact their own organizations and themselves personally.

- **Emphasize Shared Learning** – Successful CI Initiatives see shared learning as essential and strengthened by a commitment to continuous, shared learning focused on systems change with indicators that measure that change. An emphasis on shared learning also requires a willingness to iterate and adapt the CI Initiative's initial framework and approach based upon that learning

- **Focus on Changing Systems** – Successful Collective Impact are intentional about embracing strategies that challenge and work to change power structures, silos, resources, and policies – the systems – that impact the issue they are focused on changing. The multisectoral collaboration embedded in Collective Impact efforts is a strength in the work of eliminating silos and changing systems. Amplifying the voices, stories, and narratives of those most impacted by the issues is a powerful way that CI Initiatives build commitment and monitor progress in their efforts to change systems.

- **Develop a Shared End-State Linked to Shared Data** – Mature, successful Collective Impact initiatives appreciate the importance of aligning all stakeholders around a "shared end-state" or aspiration that all are committed to working towards. The focus of this aspiration is reinforced with shared data that tracks progress and helps identify how the issue is changing. When there are multiple local CI Initiatives working as part of a broader national initiative, the use of shared data at both the local and national levels can help demonstrate both the local and cumulative impacts of the work.

- **Appreciate That Collective Impact Is a "Social Process"** – Successful Collective Impact initiatives begin by establishing a shared understanding of their current reality that is informed by quantitative and qualitative data. This requires diverse partners to sit at the same table, learn together and use this shared understanding to drive their action. It also requires a shared understanding that appreciates the iterative nature of their work. Furthermore, it includes recognition that co-designing a "one-off solution" that they can later assess if their work is successful or unsuccessful.

It is worth noting that three of the five insights shared focus on the importance of shared data to both reach consensus on a Common Agenda and track progress on achieving it, as well as the importance of including a specific focus on systems change strategies. The article ***Using Data to Disrupt Systemic Inequity*** documents the efforts of StriveTogether – a national network of Cradle-to-Career Collective Impact initiatives operating in nearly 70 communities across 30 states – to develop a series of "10 cradle-to-career systems indicators" to support its work. The process to develop the systems indicators involved more than 500 network members as well as other key stakeholders and led to the creation of ***A Guide to Racial and Ethnic Equity Systems Indicator***s. This document provides a detailed overview of StriveTogether's systems indicators framework and features several case examples of how the framework is being used by several of its network members.

The article ***Centering Racial Justice and Grassroots Ownership in Collective Impact*** profiles an excellent case study for anyone keen to learn more about how to translate the wisdom and insights shared by seasoned Collective Impact leaders into practice in their own work. The article profiles the journey of the Communities that Care Coalition in Western Massachusetts, as they have evolved from a "very white, top-down coalition" to a Collective Impact initiative that has made equity central and intentionally focused on community engagement to foster grassroots community ownership of its work.

ETAMARACK
I N S T I T U T E

Collective Impact | What *NOT* to Do

Collective Impact, like any approach that has rapidly gained popularity and prominence, is vulnerable to being judged by the wide variance in how it is understood and implemented. The article ***10 Dangers to Collective Impact*** by Paul Schmitz shines a spotlight on some of the worst practices in the implementation of the CI Framework. These include:

1. **Strategy Drift** – Most CI Initiatives devote lots of time and attention to developing their Initiative's common agenda, but then don't hold each other accountable to the implementation of that strategy, which results in a focus on activities and less attention to ultimate outcomes. Shying away from "hard choices" or trying to please competing stakeholder interests are two common reasons this happens.

2. **Culture Drift** – Relationships and trust are the "glue" that help drive the work of Collective Impact and there is often real intentionally about fostering this in the early days of most CI Initiatives. Over time it is not uncommon for these practices to be sacrificed in favour of "doing the work." Unfortunately, this often occurs around the same time as the initiative is confronting hard choices and or needing to have difficult conversations.

3. **Treating Action Teams as Committees** – Action Teams/Working Groups in a Collective Impact initiative are responsible for developing and implementing work plans. This is very different than traditional committees that share information, offer feedback, or oversee the work of others

4. **Lack of Transparency** – Successful Collective Impact Initiatives ensure that every effort is made to maintain fair, inclusive, and transparent decision-making processes for the entire Collective Impact initiative

5. **Having the Wrong People at the Table** – Three common examples of this challenge are: a leadership table that is too top-down and/or lack connection and credibility with community partners; a leadership group that lacks authority and/or influence to implement their common agenda; and/or a Leadership group that doesn't reflect the community being served

6. **Lack of Accountability** – The leaders of a Collective Impact initiative need to ensure a balance between inclusion and accountability. Maintaining accountability builds credibility and demonstrates a commitment to generating impact and achieving results

7. **Funder and/or Political Hijacking** – The long-term work of Collective Impact rarely fits within typical funding and/or election cycles. This can create situations where access to needed resources ends just as the initiative itself is beginning to gain momentum and damage trust with community. These realities highlight the importance of cultivating, and sustaining, strong relationships with public officials and funders ideally as part of the leadership table of your CI Initiative.

8. **Managing CI Initiatives Like Organizations** – It is very common to structure Collective Impact initiatives like organizations because the organizational paradigm is the one that leaders of CI initiatives are most familiar with. This is problematic. The job of the CI Backbone is not to create another organization, but rather to support alignment, commitment, and capacity-building

TAMARACK INSTITUTE

across the initiative's various actors. The CI initiative's leadership is to serve as stewards of the common agenda, foster shared leadership and hold one another accountable

9. **Insufficient Time Frames** – When CI Initiatives set unrealistic timelines in reaching their outcomes, they lose momentum. It is not uncommon for it to take two years to build relationships, shared understanding, and a common agenda. Intentionally nurturing quick wins, providing regular communications and engagement opportunities with partners and the community; establishing annual work plans and celebrating the completion of milestones all help to mitigate this.

10. **Lack of Adaptive Leadership** – Adaptive leadership skills are needed to manage the complexity in CI Initiative's efforts. The ability to navigate both the interpersonal dynamics and diverse perspectives among Collective Impact leaders is critical. Equally important is the need for the leaders of the CI Initiative to manage their own teams and/or organizations when they are impacted by the work of the Collective Impact initiative as well.

A More Nuanced Understanding of Shared Measurement

The importance of shared data and measurement has always been essential in Collective Impact. The framework's Shared Measurement condition is one of the characteristics that distinguishes Collective Impact from other forms of collaboration. Over the past decade, practitioners have developed a more robust and nuanced understanding of how it applies to advancing the work of Collective Impact. In the article ***Data in Collective Impact: Focusing on What Matters***, Justin Piff from Equal Measure distills four lessons from his work with more than 100 place-based Collective Impact Initiatives to illustrate how understanding of the shared measurement condition has deepened and how this can enable practitioners to use data more effectively in their social change efforts.

1. **Prioritize Learning, Not the Data System** – Data is crucial in helping the diverse leaders of Collective Impact Initiatives, but it is "not an end in itself." Successful CI Initiatives use data to better understand their shared issue; focus their collective work and monitor their joint progress over time. To effectively support the work of Collective Impact, the data being monitored needs to link to – and help inform – the Common Agenda. It is equally important that leaders regularly make time to come together to make "sense" of the data and what it means to their work.

2. **Be Clear About Whose Lives You Hope to Improve** – Data that masks disparities in race, ethnicity, gender, income etc. within the communities served by a CI initiative will fail to highlight important opportunities to influence changes that really matter. Data that can reveal disparities that can support the use of targeted universalism, an effective approach in which universal goals are reached by using targeted strategies to achieve them. Having data that can help reveal disparities can enable CI Initiatives to develop and refine targeted strategies that maximize their impact. Without access to disaggregated data, CI Initiatives run the risk of embracing less effective, generic strategies and unintentionally perpetuating the systemic discrimination experienced of those they are working to support.

3. **Use Qualitative Data** – Funders and others often prefer quantitative data over qualitative data. Understanding the story behind a data result is central to the work of Collective Impact

Initiatives to develop effective strategies that leverage the unique community context where they are being implemented. The stories and patterns revealed in qualitative data offer a richness of information that supports CI initiatives to develop an understanding of the factors that contribute to the change we are hoping to achieve.

4. **Keep the Short AND Long Games in View** – It is important for Collective Impact initiatives to balance attention between short- and long-term progress in the outcomes they are achieving for individuals as well as those related to systems change

"Data can play a transformative role in setting, refining, and evaluating collective impact strategies. Shared measurement—grounded in a culture of learning and focused on equitable processes and outcomes—may be our greatest hope for shared understanding of the societal challenges communities face"

Looking Forward | What's Next for Collective Impact?

- Even though the work of Collective Impact is hard, we now have evidence, and countless examples that demonstrate it's an approach that works on complex issues that many have assumed are impossible to solve

- Collective Impact approaches absolutely require funding and we have learned that solving tough issues is more about how we organize ourselves and hold ourselves accountable to finding solutions that work

- Our collective understanding about how systemic issues impact the complex issues we are working to address has deepened and this understanding is now more broadly understood by the public

Power and Collective Impact in Australia profiles the evolution of Collective Impact in Australia illustrating the adaptability of the framework and highlights the importance of adapting it ways that are sensitive to the culture and context in which it is being implemented. The authors note, "Systemic collaboration in Australia necessitates working with the long tail of our colonial origins and our relationship with authority. Paradoxically, Australians are both anti-authoritarian and highly dependent on authorities…Culturally, Australians look to government to fix problems and also complain about the role government plays."

The uniqueness of the Australian context has meant that "Collective Impact is framed and practiced with an explicit focus on power." This has meant that community members and organizational leaders have had to understand and step into their personal, cultural, and collective power. Backbone staff have needed skill in helping to facilitate power dynamics with a sensitivity to how formal and informal power impact the common agenda. It has also required philanthropists and governments to develop greater awareness of power and power-sharing in the development of policy and funding allocation decisions.

Tamarack's contribution to the Collective Impact, 10 Years Later SSIR series has just been released. The article, entitled **_How Field Catalysts Accelerate Collective Impact_**, explores a value-added contribution to the work of individual Collective Impact initiatives which we call a Field Catalyst. Our exploration of the multifaceted role of the Field Catalyst is based on the work that Tamarack has historically provided.

It is our belief that the value-added contributions of Field Catalysts enable individual Collective Impact initiatives to accelerate their impact and success in achieving lasting systems change. We are eager to foster further dialogue with you, the members of our learning community, to hear your feedback and to help us continue to develop collective understanding of the Field Catalyst role and how its value-added role to the practice of Collective Impact can be strengthened and continue to evolve to enhance efforts to advance systems change solutions.

TAMARACK
I N S T I T U T E