



# Evolving the Practice of Collective Impact

## Inspiration from the Field

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It has been almost a decade since John Kania and Mark Kramer's article [\*Collective Impact\*](#) was published in the Winter 2011 issue of the Stanford Social Innovation Review. Since that time, understanding of Collective Impact (CI) has evolved beyond being viewed only as a framework for achieving high-impact outcomes on an array of complex social and/or environmental issues. As Collective Impact practitioners have experimented with applying the CI framework to an array of issues at a variety of scales, important insights and lessons have been generated and generously shared. This has laid the foundation for what is now a robust global field of practice.

This paper profiles key milestones in the evolution of Collective Impact (CI) and explores examples of CI in action at three distinct scales: the neighbourhood level; the regional or community level; and, the national level. Lessons gleaned from the use of CI at each of these scales are profiled with an emphasis on noting their capacity and contribution to advancing systems level change. Opportunities to further strengthen and/or accelerate systems change efforts with Collective Impact are also explored.

### Collective Impact: A Framework for Large-Scale Change

Collective Impact is a disciplined form of multi-sector collaboration. The CI framework includes 3 pre-conditions and 5 conditions which, together, create a shared vision, plan and commitment that coordinates the efforts of diverse partners. As articulated in *Collective Impact*, the framework moves these partners beyond simply collaborating to co-create a coordinated strategy and shared commitment for addressing a complex issue. "Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations and the progress toward shared objectives." (Kania & Kramer, *Collective Impact*, 2011, p. 39) As the practice of Collective Impact has evolved, the framework's 3 pre-conditions and 5 conditions have proven to be "roughly right" as a comprehensive roadmap for generating powerful results.

Collective Impact's credibility as an approach is evidenced by growing awareness of Collective Impact within a wide variety of sectors and an increasing willingness from funders and governments to recognize, invest and participate in Collective Impact initiatives as a valid way of addressing an array of tough issues. Another important milestone in the maturity of Collective Impact as a field of practice was the undertaking of a field-wide evaluation of Collective Impact involving a review of twenty-five Collective Impact Initiatives across North America. The evaluation entitled, [\*When Collective Impact Has an Impact\*](#), was conducted collaboratively by ORS Impact and Spark Policy Institute.

The analysis and conclusions outlined represent an important third-party validation of the value and credibility of Collective Impact as an approach and offer valuable insights and recommendations to both practitioners and funders for bringing further rigour to the field of practice over time.

The study found that 20 of the 25 CI Initiatives studied demonstrated population level changes, which the evaluators defined as, "changes for specific people within specific systems, geographic areas, or with specific needs." Furthermore, these population-level changes "generally stemmed from changes in services, practices, and policies." In seven of the eight in-depth site visits revealed "strong or compelling data linking new or expanded programs/services or practice improvements in the CI initiatives to the population change." (ORS Impact; Spark Policy Institute, 2018, p. 7) Three sites demonstrated "strong evidence linking the different components of the initiatives' work to the change, and no plausible alternative hypotheses to better explain or augment our understanding of how change happened (ORS Impact; Spark Policy Institute, 2018, p. 8)

## Collective Impact 3.0 – An Evolution in the Revolution

The publishing of [\*Collective Impact 3.0\*](#) by Liz Weaver and Mark Cabaj marked another pivotal milestone in the understanding and evolving practice of Collective Impact. They acknowledged the field's deepened understanding of the CI Framework which had grown to include a deeper appreciation of the journey from inception to maturity within CI initiatives as well as a set of [\*principles of practice\*](#) co-developed with CI practitioners via the [\*Collective Impact Forum's\*](#) online community. The two primary reasons they argued for an upgrade of the original Collective Impact framework were: first, there had been enough experimentation with CI in a variety of contexts to appreciate some of its limitations; and, second, there was an opportunity to strengthen the practice of CI by weaving it together with the rich tradition of other well-established approaches to community change.

### *CI 3.0: Embracing a Movement-Building Paradigm*

Collective Impact 3.0 calls for incorporating a new leadership paradigm that extends the "shared management" mindset outlined in the Collective Impact to also incorporate a "movement-building" paradigm. This new paradigm of leadership heightens the importance of a diverse network of relationships and the need to engage others in exploring, contributing and co-creating solutions to address it. When the shared management paradigm's emphasis on generating results is combined with the movement-building paradigm's focus on opening "up people's hearts and minds to new possibilities, create the receptive climate for new ideas to take hold and embolden policymakers and system leaders." (Weaver & Cabaj, 2016, p. 3)

Collective Impact 3.0 also proposes an upgrade in the original five conditions of collective impact that are in keeping with the movement-building leadership paradigm as its foundation as outlined in the visual below.

| Collective Impact 2.0                  | ↔ | Collective Impact 3.0                  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Leadership Paradigm</b>             |   |  |
| <b>Management</b>                      | ↔ | <b>Movement Building</b>               |
| <b>Five Conditions</b>                 |   |  |
| <b>Common Agenda</b>                   | ↔ | <b>Community Aspiration</b>            |
| <b>Shared Measurement</b>              | ↔ | <b>Strategic Learning</b>              |
| <b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b> | ↔ | <b>High Leverage Activities</b>        |
| <b>Continuous Communications</b>       | ↔ | <b>Inclusive Community Involvement</b> |
| <b>Backbone</b>                        | ↔ | <b>Containers for Change</b>           |

Response to Collective Impact 3.0 as an upgrade of the original CI Framework was extremely well-received by the field. Petra Chambers-Sinclair, a CI practitioner since 2013, also shared praise for Collective Impact 3.0, noting that it captured three patterns that she was frequently seeing within her own work of supporting the implementation of Collective Impact: the emphasis on the role of community; the emphasis on high leverage activities; and the need to attend to leaders’ inner journey of change. (Chambers-Sinclair, 2017)

### Collective Impact in Action: Inspirations from the Field

Tamarack has always focused on the intersection of theory and practice. Our Learning Centre supports community change-makers in growing their knowledge and capacity to understand, apply and leverage proven frameworks to accelerate the creation of strong communities. We draw upon the insights and experiences of practitioners to accelerate the work of community change—making the application of frameworks and approaches simpler and more effective through the sharing of practitioner knowledge and experience. Specifically related to the practice of Collective Impact we have been impressed by the framework’s adaptability to range of different scales—from neighbourhood-based CI efforts, regional or community wide Collective Impact initiatives, and finally examples of national Collective Impact initiatives. We will now profile examples of collective impact in action at each of these scales to highlight particular strengths, limitations and emerging patterns of applying the collective impact framework at each scale.

### Collective Impact at the Neighbourhood Scale

There is a robust tradition of neighbourhood-based community change efforts. By focusing efforts in a relatively small geography, neighbourhood-based change has the advantage of being able to focus on the unique assets and relationships that exist within that particular place. This often results in “a holistic approach that utilizes and enhances the natural and human assets of a particular place to strengthen local capacity to adapt.” (Markey, 2010, p. 2). Another tremendous benefit of neighbourhood-based change is that it often provides an ability to focus on a manageable scale where people can often see first-hand the impacts of their actions. In this way, it

engages by demonstrating that change at this level is far-reaching, yet feasible.” (The Resilient Neighbourhoods Project, 2013, p. 9)

Interest in embracing a Collective Impact approach to neighbourhood change is an idea that’s gaining momentum across Canada as more and more municipalities are keen to find ways to foster greater collaboration across city departments as well as with community-based organizations, citizen groups and ordinary people to strengthen the social fabric of their cities.

The [City of Waterloo](#), the [City of Edmonton](#) and the [City of Hamilton](#) are just three examples of the growing number of multi-sector partnerships between municipal staff, other non-profit organizations and foundations as well as residents themselves whose leadership has contributed to jointly-held strategies for positive community change. Each includes a strong emphasis on resident leadership and capacity-building. The impact of these multi-sector efforts was well-articulated by the City of Hamilton whose evaluation of their initial pilot project in eleven communities found that, “...developing a neighbourhood action strategy is the starting point to engage residents and is an effective catalyst for community change (Cooper & Fletcher, 2019, p. 1).

### *Montreal Champions Collective Impact at the Neighbourhood Scale*

Montreal’s [Collective Impact Project](#) (CIP), which launched in 2015, is an innovative and inspiring example of Collective Impact in action at the neighbourhood level. Like many large urban centres, many Montreal neighbourhoods faced the multifaceted challenges of poverty and social exclusion. Recognizing that “persistent and complex social problems require a comprehensive and integrated approach as well as innovative solutions” the CIP was envisioned as “an accelerator of community change aimed at increasing the impact of collective action and achieve measurable and significant outcomes to reduce poverty” (Centraide of Greater Montreal, 2020) in seventeen Montreal neighbourhoods.



By embracing a focus on the neighbourhood scale and a clear long-term goal of reducing poverty, the CIP empowers local neighbourhoods to generate changes “that are designed by and for their own community” to “generate lasting impacts on many dimensions of poverty, such as food, housing, social inclusion, academic success and employment, along with community infrastructure and facilities.” (Collective Impact Project, 2020, p. 5)

Montreal’s unique approach to Collective Impact intentionally builds upon a rich tradition of and infrastructure for collective action. One of the most significant of these are the 30 Neighbourhood Round Tables that have been in place since the late 1980s and cover most of the city’s older neighbourhoods in the urban core as well as well as some in more suburban neighbourhoods which range in size from 10,000 to 100,000 residents.

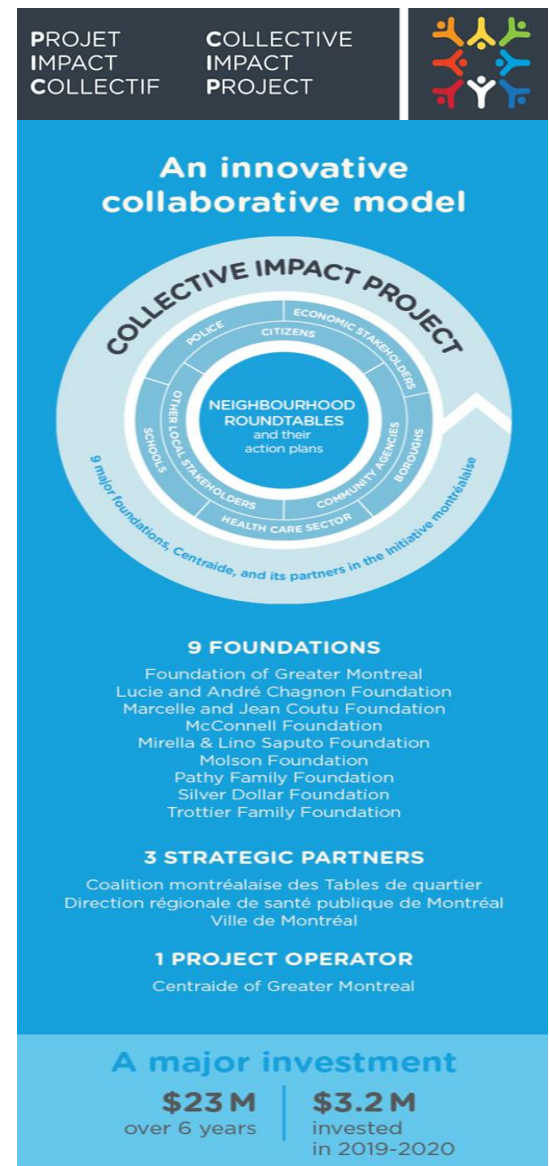
Round Tables are local cross-sector networks that bring together “as many neighborhood stakeholders as possible from various backgrounds: community organizations, institutions, the cultural community, the business community, and, above all, citizens.” (The Neighbourhood Round Tables Coalition, 2012) Each Round Table is an incorporated organization whose role is to bring together and leverage the collective capacity of local stakeholders for the betterment of the neighbourhood. The Neighbourhood Round Tables Coalition is a federation of the Montreal Neighbourhood Round Tables. The Coalition works at the city-wide scale to address common social issues impacting all the neighbourhood round tables. Many of the Round Tables play local “backbone” roles “supporting the development of a shared vision for their neighbourhood and then leading a joined-up action plan that served as a guidepost to help local organizations align their own actions with collectively-determined priorities.” (Pole & Bérubé, 2019, p. 56)

The CIP is not a program or a fund, rather it describes itself as “a new form of support for community development that reinforces but does not supplant Centraide’s normal funding methods. What makes this possible is a unique collaboration from 10 philanthropic partners – Centraide of Montreal as the Project Manager – and nine other grantmaking foundations who jointly contributed to CIP’s \$23 million dollar, six-year budget. The decision to establish collaborative funding model for the CIP was part of what makes this neighbourhood Collective Impact initiative unique. Over time however, one tension that emerged was that different funders approach the CIP from their own specific frame of reference and interests and, by the project’s mid-point changes were made in the project’s governance and operations to allow for differing levels of engagement and need amongst funder participants.”

Three non-funding strategic partners – The Coalition of Neighbourhood Round Tables, The City of Montreal and Montreal’s Public Health Department – also contribute to the overall governance of the project. As major public sector institutions, both the City and Montreal’s Public Health Department, have played a role, together with the project’s funders, in leveraging opportunities and addressing systemic barriers that are beyond the capacity of the local neighbourhoods to influence alone.

A key hypothesis in the design of the CIP is that, “...the action of a certain number of funders, if it is well-organized and coordinated among them, will allow for greater local and regional coherence and consistency and will have a more powerful collective impact than the isolated outcomes achieved so far.” (Pole & Bérubé, Centraide’s Collective Impact Project: Poverty reduction in Montréal, 2020)

Fundamental to the design of the CIP was the principle that “communities should be able to articulate what kinds of outside supports they need, based on priorities for change that local stakeholders and residents have established together. Communities receiving CIP funding could set their own goals and targets for change,



including improvements to community engagement processes and dynamics, improvements to living conditions and quality of life in the neighbourhood, or systemic issues that affect the welfare of local populations.” (Pole & Bérubé, Centraide’s Collective Impact Project: Poverty reduction in Montréal, 2020, p. 269) To date, the seventeen neighbourhoods that make up the CIP project have mobilized citizen leadership to implement projects that have:

- Provided greater access to more healthy and affordable food;
- Created access to more adequate housing
- Ensured that more young people are on the road to success;
- Increased resident access to collective infrastructure and equipment;
- More vulnerable people are included in the life of their communities; and,
- Neighbourhoods are gaining the capacity to evaluate their own impacts and using their learning to coordinate actions and partnerships (Collective Impact Project, 2020, p. 15)

The CIP has been intentionally designed as a learning project. It offered neighbourhoods a range of customized capacity-building supports and committed to flexible and adaptive management strategies that with its “evaluation, knowledge mobilization and knowledge transfer activities designed to occur within and across funded neighbourhoods, as well as within and across neighbourhoods, and funding partners.” (Pole & Bérubé, Centraide’s Collective Impact Project: Poverty reduction in Montréal, 2020, p. 269)

Another important aspiration of the CIP is that, together, the funders’ collaborative, strategic partners and neighbourhoods would be well positioned to not only address poverty reduction efforts at the local level, but also work to tackle systemic barriers that can impede the best efforts of neighbourhoods alone. Would the CIP’s funding and strategic partners be able to influence practices and policies that were negatively impacting local neighbourhood poverty-reduction efforts? At the project’s half-way point, there is evidence to suggest the answer is yes as evidenced by several promising new funding, strategies and partnerships that positively impact the work underway in many neighbourhoods – including those involved with the CIP. This includes attracting new partners and resources to assist CIP neighbourhoods to lead the redevelopment of abandoned sites; the exploration of opportunities to establish public-private-philanthropic investment for building and renovating community infrastructure spaces; and, the alignment of funding strategies to fill gaps and better support local food systems work that is now underway in almost half of the CIP neighbourhoods.

The ripple effect of the CIP may also create the conditions for greater alignment between public institutions across the city. Many of the partners in CIP are also participants in several regional initiatives focused on issues related to housing, homelessness, the build environment and education, all of which have been calling for greater cross-sector institutional alignment as well.

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### *Insights of Collective Impact at a Neighbourhood Scale*

The examples of neighbourhood level change profiled here reveal a variety of initiatives that have incorporated many, if not all, the conditions of Collective Impact, which may be a reflection of the maturity of these efforts. All demonstrate how different sectors are now collaborating to build consensus on resident-led visions for change and are mobilizing a variety of resources and supports to assist with their implementation. In her recent

blog, [Nudging Change Through the Smallest Visible System](#), my colleague Liz Weaver observed that “engaging with the smallest visible system makes sense because we can often become overwhelmed by both the enormity and complexity of larger systems.” (Weaver, Nudging Change Through the Smallest Visible System, 2020) In much the same way, efforts to apply the Collective Impact framework at a neighbourhood scale have demonstrated that people’s proximity to the issue makes positive action more practical and tangible.

Certainly, a powerful feature of the neighbourhood-focused Collective Impact initiatives profiled here is their success in resident engagement and leadership as well as the importance of investing in the capacity-building for resident leaders. Montreal’s experience is particularly impressive in its reach, long-term funding commitment, and comprehensive support infrastructure for emerging neighbourhood plans. The long-term history and tradition of the city’s Neighbourhood Round Tables was certainly an important enabler of the CIP’s success to date. The willingness of the CIP’s funding and strategic partners to embrace an adaptive approach and engage in a learning journey of their own is both courageous and innovative in its own right.

Furthermore, the explicit acknowledgement by the CIP’s founders to consider their capacity for systems-change and incorporate the “movement-building” paradigm outlined in the Collective Impact 3.0 paper. This orientation has clearly influenced the founding partners’ understanding of their own role and positioned the CIP as a catalyst for significant, long-term systems change in a variety of existing systems, the ripples of which are now being observed at the project’s half-way point.

Neighbourhood-based efforts also seem to more easily attract and mobilize the tremendous—often untapped—resources of ordinary people in ways that larger-scale change efforts often find more difficult. As Montreal’s CIP initiative illustrates, by embracing a movement-building lens and systems-change focus, the catalysts of neighbourhood-scale Collective Impact efforts are able to significantly amplify their ability to impact lasting change.

## Collective Impact at a Regional or Community-Wide Scale

We will now highlight examples where the Collective Impact Framework has been applied at a more regional and/or community-wide scale to see what patterns are emerging and what those patterns may reveal and how this knowledge can inform and strengthen our collective understanding of Collective Impact as a field of practice. Certainly, there is a wide diversity of experimentation with Collective Impact at this scale.

[Headwaters Communities in Action](#) HCIA is a citizen-led Collective Impact Initiative focused on enhancing community well-being within the rural Headwaters Region which, given its proximity to larger urban centres in the Greater Toronto area, made coordination and cooperation on region-wide issues particularly challenging. HCIA’s common agenda, which emerged after significant community consultation, was to “establish an integrated mechanism for social, economic and environmental planning...so that we can enhance and celebrate the prosperity, health and well-being of the diverse citizens of our communities” (Headwaters Communities in Action, 2007, p. 2). Two important dimensions of HCIA’s region-wide approach to Collective Impact that are worthy of note:

- **A Strong Emphasis on Citizen Leadership** – HCIA has always held citizen leadership as an important principle. This has enabled HCIA to be seen as an independent, credible and trusted voice of the community and also facilitated its ability to mobilize collaborative responses to an array of emerging issues and opportunities for the region from a diverse array of partners including foundations, local organizations and also several local municipal and regional governments.

- **Acknowledging a Role to Advance a Change in Culture** – Since its inception HClA has also been explicit about its goal of fostering culture change within the region to better appreciate the importance of collaboration. In fact, HClA's early reports to the community explicitly name the need to “strengthen our community’s ability to foster a culture of engagement, inclusion and collaboration” and, “supporting mobilization around projects to achieve the region’s shared vision.” (Cheuy, Fawcett, Hutchinson, & Robertson, 2016, p. 132)

### *Skátne Teionkwakà:nere – A Community-Wide Collective Impact Initiative in Kahnawà:ke*

[Skátne Teionkwakà:nere – Kahnawà:ke Collective Impact](#) (KCI) is a long-term grassroots movement launched in 2017 to foster greater collective action in addressing social and economic issues for this Indigenous community of approximately 6,000 just south of Montréal. Its Common Agenda is: “to support positive change that nurtures a thriving Kanien’kéhaka community rooted in a connection to our culture, identity and traditions.”

A recent [Case Study of KCI’s work](#) noted that traditional Kanien’kéhaka ways emphasize working together for the interests of the collective and the benefit of future generations. (Cheuy & Delormier, 2020, p. 1) In alignment with this tradition, KCI’s approach to Collective Impact intentionally cultivates shared leadership across sectors and perspectives to deepen shared understanding and assumes the need for aligned action by many to achieve impact. The community of Kahnawà:ke has embraced Collective Impact as a viable framework to mobilize leadership across the community on a shared plan to ensure the best possible future for all.

The work of [Skátne Teionkwakà:nere – Kahnawà:ke Collective Impact](#) continues to unfold, but unique features of this

community-wide Collective Impact Initiative highlight the framework’s adaptability to the unique cultural traditions of an Indigenous community. KCI’s approach to implementing

Collective Impact also demonstrates the power and impact of embedding a strong commitment to ongoing community engagement. KCI’s approach to Collective Impact also highlights many of the proposed evolutions outlined in **Collective Impact 3.0**. These include: an emphasis on rooting in a deeply held community aspiration; a recognition of the importance of Continuous Communication while harnessing the power of inclusive community engagement; and, the importance of focusing its backbone role to emphasize creating a “container” for community-wide change—offering clear priorities for action—while continuously inviting the input and contribution of members from across the community.

### *Healthier Together: A Palm Health Foundation Collective Impact Initiative*

In 2014, the Palm Health Foundation made a bold strategic decision when it launched the Healthier Together Initiative. Motivated by the Foundation’s dissatisfaction with the short-term gains of its responsive grantmaking, the [Healthier Together Initiative](#) was designed with a focus on addressing the social determinants of health. The Foundation committed \$1 million to six communities within their County where data had shown growing



THE KANIEN’KÉHA:KA PERSPECTIVE



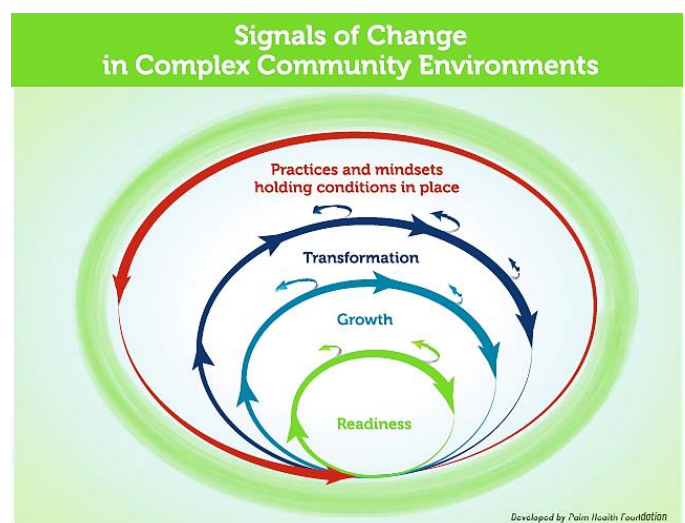
disparities in health equity. This multi-year investment by the Foundation also signaled its desire to fundamentally change how it viewed its own relationship with communities. The Foundation's ask of residents in the six communities was "to lead the way in creating lasting, systemic and transformative change" in their communities.

From the start the Healthier Together Initiative was grounded in a Collective Impact approach and the infrastructure provided to each of the six communities included a full-time project director. These project directors were employed by organizations within the six communities, who had agreed to act as financial stewards of the annual \$200,000 investment provided by the Palm Health Foundation. Each community's initiative was guided by a steering committee of residents according to the priorities identified by that community. Action Teams involving additional residents and other community stakeholders were also formed as needed to drive implementation of each community's priorities.

The Foundation just released [Transforming Communities Through the Social Determinants of Health](#) a report that documents key learnings and insights generated from the first five years of the **Healthier Together Initiative**. The document offers candid insights about both the challenges and benefits faced by the foundation and by community members as they learned together and embraced a willingness to develop a more flexible, responsive and adaptive approach to the work of community change. Patrick McNamara, President and CEO of Palm Health Foundation knew, however, that embracing an adaptive approach was essential in the face of today's increasing complexity. "Working with complexity is the new norm for working in human services. If you are not willing to embrace adaptability, you are doing a disservice to the people you are working with." (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 7)

One of the early challenges faced by the Healthier Together Initiative was underestimating the length of time needed to cultivate trust and shift the power dynamics. Residents were skeptical of the Foundation's willingness to grant funding without a pre-determined set of outcomes and metrics. Residents needed to be supported in building their own capacity and skills to support community-led decision-making and action. At the same time, Foundation Trustees and staff struggled to let go of their own traditional ways of thinking and acting. They acknowledge that, "the foundation had not prepared for, nor anticipated, the challenge it would have in articulating the vision for Healthier Together, letting go of traditional funding and measurement mechanisms and the length of time it would take to feel like it was gaining traction. This was uncharted territory." (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 11)

Over time those involved in Healthier Together came to see that their work was very much about advancing behaviour change. As their learning journey continued, the Healthier Together initiative's pre-determined ideas of success and expectations of linear progress towards community change were replaced by meaningful signals for the change it wanted to see. These signals are grouped into three areas: readiness, growth and transformation as depicted in the visual on the right. The Healthier Together Initiative also identified three types of "wins" experienced by communities within each of the signals. These "wins" include outcome wins, insight wins, and capability wins. (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 38)



This shift reflects a key insight of Healthier Together, that “embracing adaptability and fostering outcomes that value social capital, human capacity and developing people’s capacity for collaborative leadership.” (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 34) Reflecting on the first five years of journey with Healthier Together, the Palm Health Foundation notes that they themselves have undergone a fundamental transformation as an organization. “Not a single function has been untouched. Leadership and trustees have shifted mindsets from a traditional responsive grantmaking approach tied to specific health outcomes to a community change framework that embraces equity and the social determinants of health.” (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 48)

The new leadership paradigm with its emphasis on movement-building proposed in **Collective Impact 3.0** offered Palm Health Foundation and the leaders of the Healthier Together Initiative a useful anchor in thinking about their own work. The Foundation’s Vice President of Grants and Community Investment said, “When Collective Impact 3.0 came out in 2016, it nailed our work. It was a validation of what we were seeing, and we could finally put a name to it. It showed the breadth of what we were advancing in the field of health philanthropy.” (Palm Health Foundation, 2020, p. 49) In particular the notion of the backbone as a “container for change” resonated deeply with leaders of Healthier Together and affirmed that the capital they were building together with communities had all the underpinnings of building a powerful movement of change.

### *Lessons from Regional or Community-Wide Collective Impact Initiatives*

The examples of regional or community-wide Collective Impact Initiatives featured in this paper reflect a very small sample of the wealth of experimentation that is now underway world-wide in applying the Collective Impact framework to address issues and opportunities at the regional and/or community-wide scale. These examples do reveal some important insights and patterns as to the work of Collective Impact, including:

- An affirmation of the importance of authentic community engagement and resident leadership as a key ingredient of success.
- The recognition that the CI framework is flexible enough to be adapted in ways that honour and leverage unique cultural traditions.
- That embracing the CI Framework offers regional and/or community-wide initiatives the capacity and ability to act as a catalyst for significant changes in power dynamics and/or practices within existing organizations and systems.
- Collective Impact can generate behaviour changes that don’t just affect the community, but also call for organizations and sectors to also adapt and change their individual beliefs and practices as well. This was illustrated well in the insights gleaned by the Palm Health Foundation and its Healthier Together Initiative.

These patterns observed in these regional and/or community-wide Collective Impact initiatives also highlight and confirm a key insight shared in **Collective Impact 3.0**, that shifting to consider the Backbone as more of a “container for change” can also require organizations, sectors and entire systems to fundamentally re-think their traditional ways of acting. This highlights the critical importance of recognizing and supporting the inner journey of transformation experienced by many leaders of CI Initiatives as their work unfolds over time.

Another important observation demonstrated by the above examples is that the outcomes generated by the work of Collective Impact often do not neatly fit within pre-conceived, and/or linear notions of community change. This raises important questions regarding the metrics and frameworks that are used to capture the true progress and impact of embracing a Collective Impact approach.

In a recent webinar hosted by my colleague Liz Weaver entitled *Act with Impact*, she shared the Vancouver Foundation’s thinking with respect to tracking and evaluation systems change outcomes. Their approach identifies 3 orders of systems change outcomes that they anticipate in their work of community change that acknowledges success and progress in a new way that better reflects their understanding that internal and external changes often serve as signals of broader level systems changes and/or changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Vancouver Foundation: Systems Change Outcomes

| Order of Outcome               | Outcome   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Order Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased knowledge and capacity of system actors</li> <li>Improved relationships and collaboration between system actors</li> <li>Improved tools and resources available</li> </ul> |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Order Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved practices in the system (and incremental progress towards)</li> <li>Improved policies in the system (and incremental progress towards)</li> </ul>                           |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> Order Outcomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New narratives and culture shifts</li> <li>Population-level impacts</li> </ul>   |

### Collective Impact at a National Scale

Tamarack Institute’s Vibrant Communities has been a leader in convening, supporting and mobilizing collective impact initiatives at a national scale. Two of these national scale collective impact initiatives are profiled below. One—Cities Reducing Poverty (CRP)—is a mature effort supporting members to employ a collective impact approach to poverty reduction with proven results. Through the network, members learn from Tamarack experts and from one another about creating community-wide poverty reduction strategies, evaluating their efforts over time, and growing and evolving their initiative to have a sustained impact. The second example—Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF)—is a national collective impact initiative that is still in the early stages of its development. Both of these initiatives illustrate the importance of building knowledge on their specific issues of focus, poverty in the case of CRP, and barriers to youth success, in the case of CBYF while simultaneously establishing a learning and support infrastructure between and across local initiatives that facilitates knowledge-sharing both about their issue of focus as well as knowledge of the collective impact approach as well.

#### *Vibrant Communities: A National Collective Impact Initiative to Reduce Poverty*

In 2002, Tamarack launched Vibrant Communities Canada (VCC) in partnership with the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Caledon Institute of Social Policy. Originally an action-learning experiment, VCC was a national collective impact effort to reduce poverty. The work began initially in five Canadian communities and quickly expanded to a total of 13 Canadian cities referred to as “trailblazers”. These trailblazers each embraced a multi-sector approach and formed its own local, multi-sector leadership team to develop its local plan to reduce poverty. The common agenda of VCC was to use a place-based approach to reduce poverty by 10% or more within the participating cities.

At the end of the first decade, this national network of local poverty reduction initiatives had together generated 322,698 poverty-reducing benefits that impacted 202,931 Canadian households. To achieve this, the local projects had been catalysts for more than 160 different poverty-reducing initiatives and had mobilized an investment of \$22.8 million into local communities. The network had also generated 53 substantive changes in government policies. (Gamble, 2010, p. 7)

During this first phase of VCC's work, it did not prescribe what the local poverty reduction efforts should focus on. Instead, local tables were encouraged to build their plans around the poverty reduction priorities that resonated most with their communities. The local initiatives were however asked to align on HOW their work unfolded locally. The five common design principles embraced by the local Vibrant Communities initiatives included:

- A focus on poverty-reduction
- A commitment to comprehensive thinking and action
- A multi-sector collaborative approach
- An emphasis on building and/or strengthening community assets and connections
- A commitment to community learning and change – shifting the narrative on poverty

Tamarack played an essential backbone role to this national effort. Local poverty reduction initiatives that benefited from technical support and coaching by Tamarack's team were also offered the opportunity to connect regularly with the leads in the other communities to form a peer learning network that shared successes and insights. The peers also came together to collaborate jointly when that made sense. This emphasis on reflection and peer learning played a critical role in simplifying and accelerating local poverty reduction efforts. Being part of a national network was also an important source of credibility and validation for the newly established local efforts.

Beginning in 2011, Phase II of Vibrant Communities, known as [Vibrant Communities - Cities Reducing Poverty](#), was launched and continues today. In 2019, more than 360 municipalities represented by 80 members are part of the Cities Reducing Poverty network. Between 2015-2018, the work of the Cities Reducing Poverty network had contributed to a 24% decline in the national poverty rate, from 14.5% to 11% -- the lowest level of poverty in our nation's history! (Tamarack Institute, 2019, p. 6) Key elements of success of this national collective impact initiative include:

- Influential and credible convener(s)
- Cross-sector, connected leadership tables
- Co-creating a challenging community aspiration
- Having a clearly articulated purpose and approach – A Framework for Change
- Ensuring a high degree of resident mobilization
- A commitment to research and understanding of poverty which captures shared impact and informs the work

Reflecting on the work and impact of Vibrant Communities as a National Collective Impact Initiative have also revealed seven important lessons for those wanting to undertake a multi-sectoral national approach to addressing a complex and multifaceted issue such as poverty. These lessons include:

1. Get—and link—a “worm’s eye” and a “bird’s eye view”
2. Learn and adapt to the local context
3. Learn by doing and share that learning
4. Make both horizontal AND vertical connections
5. Be persistent, have appropriate expectations and make a long-term (multi-year) commitment
6. Generating community-wide momentum and support
7. Tracking and reporting on the impact that the initiative has committed to

These lessons, together with the proven results generated by Vibrant Communities Canada and Cities Reducing Poverty, offer rich insights that confirm the validity of implementing Collective Impact Initiatives at the national scale. By balancing local leadership with a national network that supports reflection, learning as well as capacity-building tools and opportunities creates an infrastructure that can support the growth and renewal of local poverty reduction efforts. It also served as a powerful resource for co-creating a powerful national narrative that supports a continued recognition and commitment to poverty-reduction. The national backbone also plays an essential role in identifying and coordinating member responses to opportunities for systems change at both the provincial and national levels.

The Vibrant Communities | Cities Reducing Poverty Initiative now provides important input in guiding the design of a new national Collective Impact initiative that was launched by Tamarack in partnership with the Government of Canada.

### *Communities Building Youth Futures: A National CI Initiative Focused on Youth Success*

2020 marked the launch of Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF), an ambitious five-year national Collective Impact initiative to work with 13 communities across Canada to help increase high school graduation rates. National and local community partners, including youth, community leaders, governments and businesses, work collectively to develop system-wide solutions for a minimum of 5000 youth as they build upon plans for their future and transition into adulthood.

“A primary goal in engaging youth facing barriers is to develop local Collective Impact strategies that enable young people to be engaged in their communities and successfully navigate transitions from youth to adulthood.” (Tamarack Institute , 2020) Key features of this national Collective Impact initiative include:

- **A Network of 13 Local CBYF Collective Impact Initiatives** – Each table receives funding support to establish a backbone team as well as ongoing coaching, network convening and technical assistance from Tamarack.
- **A National Collaborative** – This collaborative of national organizations, businesses, youth, and governments are already engaged in working on issues affecting youth facing barriers across the country. It will provide strategic guidance, identify opportunities to influence and leverage systems changes, promote identification and sharing of best practices and engage in identifying project sustainability.
- **Annual Partner Convening** – Collective Impact efforts benefit significantly from an investment in evaluation and learning. The annual partner convening will engage leaders from the thirteen CBYF communities as well as the National Collaborative to come together, share emerging practices and learn from each other.
- **An Innovation Fund** – The 13 CBYF Communities have access to a community innovation fund. The fund will be used to test and evaluate new tools, supports, and approaches identified by the community.
- **Evaluation and Learning** – As foundational components to any successful Collective Impact project, an evaluation will be implemented throughout the duration of the project. It will employ a developmental evaluation approach which will greatly inform and strengthen on-going learning and continuous improvement. In addition, Tamarack will support the project through the development of learning and technical assistance supports to communities in supporting it. (Tamarack Institute , 2020)

The CBYF national initiative is still in the early stages of its development but already the 13 member communities are actively involved in the learning network and value the opportunity to connect with and learn from their peer communities.

### *Reflections on Implementing Collective Impact at a National Scale*

Many successful Collective Impact Initiatives, regardless of their scale, often talk about the usefulness of thinking in terms of “chunking and linking” smaller, focused initiatives in an aligned way as an important strategy for advancing change on a complex issue. In many ways, this image also helps to see the additional value that can be created when individualized local change efforts are “linked” together in a coherent way that facilitates shared learning and facilitates the ability of local initiatives to quickly align and mobilize around opportunities for policy and systems change.

What has been particularly valuable about the Vibrant Communities initiative is its maturity as a National Collective Impact Initiative. The use of a phased approach allowed the initiative to manage its growth. It also helped focus and delineate the initiative’s “demonstration phase” from its “growth & expansion” phase. The longevity of the Vibrant Communities Network also illuminates the important role that a national backbone plays in maintaining focus and attention on an important social issue while also serving as an ongoing resource to support the establishment, growth and renewal of a growing network of local poverty reduction efforts.

## **Panarchy and the Possibility of Amplifying the Impact of CI**

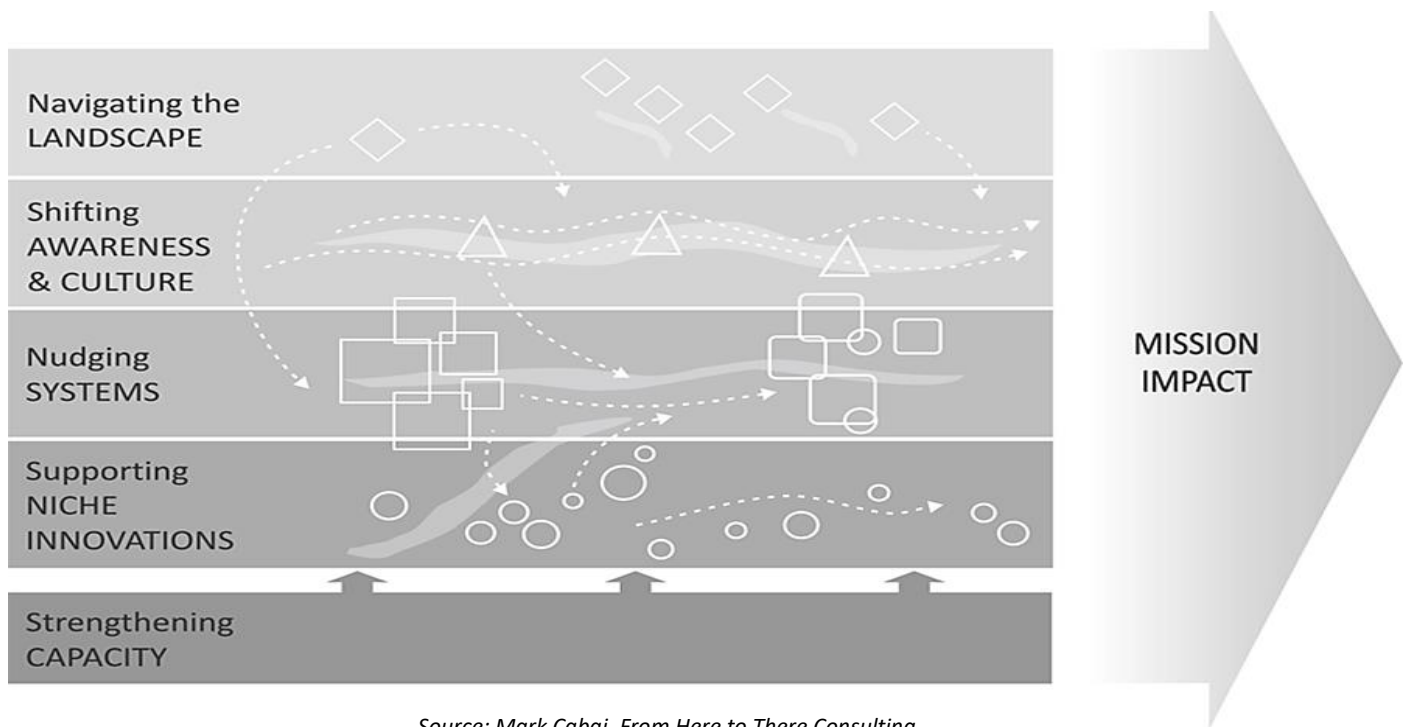
This quick look at examples of Collective Impact across various scales—neighbourhood, region or community and national—has shown the flexibility and adaptability of the Collective Impact framework. The importance of embracing a movement-building paradigm to the work of Collective Impact (as proposed in *Collective Impact 3.0*) offers a further, more nuanced appreciation of the CI Framework that emphasizes the importance of ongoing and authentic community engagement, continuous learning, and the need to support leaders in navigating the important inner work that often accompanies embracing their backbone role as providing a “container for change.”

As the field of Collective Impact continues to grow and expand, an important next evolution in the work of Collective Impact may emerge from considering what mechanisms and supports might be needed to facilitate linking and connecting Collective Impact Initiatives across multiple scales more regularly and intentionally. The field of Social Innovation uses the concept of panarchy, an idea borrowed from the field of ecology, to emphasize the importance of paying attention not just to the interactions that are occurring at any particular scale, but also considering the impact and interactions between and across different scales. That’s because, “What happens in a system at one scale can affect what happens at other scales...and how the focal system responds to constraints imposed from larger-scale systems or to innovation from smaller nested scales.” (Gunderson, Kinzig, Quinlan, & Walker, 2010, p. 7)

**I believe that systems shift most effectively when change is happening at multiple levels with some sort of loose congruence. Change is held back when a pre-ponderance of effort is focused at a single layer of a system and other layers are frozen in place or even changing in an opposing direction.**

All social systems (individuals, groups, organizations and institutions (e.g. economies, cultures etc.) are perpetually evolving through an adaptive cycle of birth, exploration, maturity and destruction. However different systems go through this cycle at different rhythms. Because all living systems are “influenced by larger-scale systems in which it is embedded, as well as by the smaller-scale systems of which it is comprised,” (Gunderson, Kinzig, Quinlan, & Walker, 2010, p. 29) it’s important to consider how to nurture opportunities for cross-scale interactions. In fact, the authors of *Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed*, note that, “Much deep novelty or transformation, comes from cross-scale or cross-system interactions.” (Westley, Zimmerman, & Quinn Patton, 2006, p. 206) This observation is echoed by Elizabeth Sawin of Climate Interactive who said, “I believe that systems shift most effectively when change is happening at multiple levels with some sort of loose congruence. I also think that change is held back when a preponderance of effort is focused at a single layer of a system and other layers are frozen in place or even changing in an opposing direction.” (Sawin, 2019)

My colleague Mark Cabaj shares the graphic below to illustrate the role and importance of cross-scale interactions in the work of community change efforts. Using the example of the multi-sectoral effort to save the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia as a case study, Cabaj offers four emerging insights that provides a starting point for considering how Collective Impact initiatives may better begin to capitalize on cross-scale interaction.



Source: Mark Cabaj, *From Here to There Consulting*

The four insights are:

1. **Widen Our Gaze** – Getting to “mission level” impact requires cumulative mutually reinforcing change on at least four levels – landscape, awareness/culture, systems & niche innovations
2. **Take Capacity and Agency-Building Seriously** – The strengthening of stakeholders’ capacity and agency is a necessary pre-condition for meaningful change – particularly for those most affected by the issue. This is an OUTCOME.

3. **Embrace Conflict and Cooperation** – Real change depends on our willingness and ability to manage both conflict and cooperation amongst diverse actors with different values, interests and powers.
4. **Lengthen Our Gaze** – Sustained progress on tough issues is rarely linear and requires relentless effort—two steps forward and one step back, and sudden leaps forward—over a long period of time.

Intentionally finding ways to foster and promote more cross-scale interaction and cooperation between and among various Collective Impact Initiatives may offer the field a greater way to consider advancing lasting change.

## Conclusion

Kania and Kramer provided a huge gift to changemakers with the articulation of the Collective Impact Framework. What it provides is a clear and compelling roadmap of the key elements needed to establish a new way for system players to learn and work together united by a shared commitment for change. Collective Impact, however, is NOT and was never intended to be viewed as a simple recipe. Given the unique and dynamic nature of communities, changemakers can, at best view the Collective Impact framework as an important guide for the design of their community change strategy.

The field has embraced the CI Framework and there are rich examples at all scales that illustrate its value as an approach. Collective Impact 3.0 has added an important paradigm-shift that has offered changemakers a way of considering and deepening their Collective Impact strategies in ways that broaden and strengthen community ownership and advance both programmatic and systems-change strategies through their CI work.

Moving forward, I believe a next evolution in the practice of Collective Impact should include inviting practitioners to consider capitalizing on opportunities to align their work with like efforts across multiple scales to generate greater impact and what additional supports might be needed to facilitate this. Tamarack's [Cities Deepening Community](#) is one specific example that is nurturing an opportunity for neighbourhood-scale change efforts to contribute to a national scale collective impact movement. Now with membership from 67 cities who share a common desire to strengthen neighbourhoods and 25 cities who are now developing community plans to grow citizen engagement, civic leadership and a sense of belonging, the CDC initiative is experimenting with what it takes—and what becomes possible—when cross-scale connections are made. Certainly, virtual platforms such as the [Collective Impact Forum](#) as well as [Tamarack's own website](#) are resources that can help facilitate this, but a greater commitment and focus by practitioners to consider opportunities to nurture cross-scale alignment is also needed.



## About Sylvia Cheuy

Sylvia is a Consulting Director of the Tamarack Institute's Collective Impact Idea Area. She is passionate about community change and what becomes possible when residents and various sector leaders share an aspirational vision for their future. Sylvia believes that when the assets of residents and community are recognized and 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 that fosters collaborative leadership and action in support of a long-term vision of well-being for Ontario's Headwaters region. This experience gives Sylvia practical knowledge and first-hand experience of what it takes to engage and mobilize positive community change. Her work with HCIA was published as a chapter entitled, *A Citizen-Led Approach to Enhancing Community Well-Being* in published [Handbook of Community Well-Being Research](#).

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The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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