Collective Impact Principles of Practice

We have been inspired watching the field of collective impact progress over the past five years, as thousands of practitioners, funders, and policymakers around the world employ the approach to help solve complex social problems at a large scale. The field's understanding of what it takes to put the collective impact approach into practice continues to evolve through the contributions of many who are undertaking the deep work of collaborative social change, and their successes build on decades of work around effective cross-sector collaboration. Accomplished practitioners of collective impact continue to affirm the critical importance of achieving population-level change in the five conditions of collective impact that John Kania and Mark Kramer originally identified in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in winter 2011. (For an explanation of the conditions, see the end of this document.) Many practitioners tell us that the framework developed in the original article has helped to provide the field with a shared definition and useful language to describe core elements of a rigorous and disciplined, yet flexible and organic, approach to addressing complex problems at scale.

Successful collective impact practitioners also observe, however, that while the five conditions Kania and Kramer initially identified are necessary, they are not sufficient to achieve impact at the population level. Informed by lessons shared among those who are implementing the approach in the field, **this document outlines additional principles of practice that we believe can guide practitioners about *how* to successfully put collective impact into action.** While many of these principles are not unique to collective impact, we have seen that the combination of the five conditions *and* these practices contributes to meaningful population-level change. We hope that these principles help funders, practitioners, and policymakers consider what it takes to apply the collective impact approach, and that they will bolster existing efforts to overcome challenges and roadblocks in their work. We also hope these principles can help guide those who aspire toward collective impact, but may not yet be implementing the approach fully, to identify possible changes that might increase their odds of success. As we continue to apply the conditions and principles of collective impact, we fully expect that, over time, our shared understanding of what constitutes good practice will evolve further.

1. **Design and implement the initiative with a priority placed on equity**. For collective impact initiatives to achieve sustainable improvements in communities, it is critical that these initiatives address the systemic structures and practices that create barriers to equitable outcomes for all populations, particularly along the lines of race and class. To that end, collective impact initiatives must be intentional in their design from the very outset to ensure that an equity lens is prominent throughout their governance, planning, implementation, and evaluation. In designing and implementing collective impact with a focus on equity, practitioners must disaggregate data and develop strategies that focus on improving outcomes for affected populations.

2. **Include community members in the collaborative**. Members of the community—those whose lives are most directly and deeply affected by the problem addressed by the initiative—must be meaningfully engaged in the initiative's governance, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Community members

can bring crucial (and sometimes overlooked) perspectives to governance bodies and decision-making tables, can contribute to refining the collective impact initiative's evolving goals, strategies, and indicators, can help co-create and implement solutions that are rooted in lived experience and have the potential for significant uptake, can participate in building communities' capacity to lead and sustain change, and can participate in data interpretation and continuous learning processes. Sometimes, decision-makers or other stakeholders may inadvertently face power dynamics or other structural barriers that can hinder particular partners from participating candidly and fully; true inclusion requires intentional examination of group needs and processes to ensure that all stakeholders have full opportunity to contribute to the process. Engaging community in these ways helps collective impact efforts address the issues most important to those most directly affected, builds capacity and enables community participation in and ownership of solutions, and helps embed the work in the community so that it will be more effective and sustainable.

3. **Recruit and co-create with cross-sector partners**. Collective impact collaboratives are created by and composed of actors from across sectors and parts of the community, including nonprofits, government, private sector, philanthropy, and residents. While not all initiatives will engage *all* sectors actively at the same time, collaboratives made up of only one or two types of actors (e.g., all nonprofits, all funders) do not have the diversity of actors required to create the systems-level view that contributes to a robust collective impact initiative. These cross-sector partners, who all have a role to play in the solution, share in co-creating the common agenda, identifying shared measures, and implementing the work required to achieve the effort's goals.

4. **Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve**. Collective impact is not a solution, but rather a collaborative problem-solving process. This process requires partners to remain aware of changes in context, to collect and learn from data, to openly share information and observations with others, and to adapt their strategies quickly in response to an evolving environment. To accomplish this, initiatives should have clear learning priorities, build strong structures and processes for learning, and create a learning culture that enables the group to use meaningful, credible, and useful qualitative and quantitative data for continuous learning and strategic refinement. Many initiatives find it valuable to use a disciplined and formalized process to guide their use of data.

5. **Cultivate leaders with unique system leadership skills**. For collective impact initiatives to achieve transformational change, leaders must possess strong facilitation, management, and convening skills. They must be able to create a holding space for people to come together and work out their disparate viewpoints, they must possess the capacity to foster shared meaning and shared aspirations among participants, they must be able to help participants understand the complexity and non-linearity of system-level change, they must be dedicated to the health of the whole and willing to change their own organizations in service of the group's agenda, and they must be adept at building relationships and trust among collaborators. These system leadership skills are essential for the backbone, and also other leaders in the collaborative such as steering committee members, community leaders, and action team leaders.

6. **Focus on program *and* system strategies**. The mutually reinforcing activities that the initiative takes on to achieve its goals should focus on collective program and system change strategies rather than individual programs or organizations. System strategies include strategies that increase communication and coordination across organizations, change the practices and behavior of professionals and beneficiaries, shift social and cultural norms, improve services system wide (by spreading techniques that already work within the community across organizations, or by bringing a new evidence-based practice into the community), and change policies.

7. **Build a culture that fosters relationships, trust, and respect across participants**. Collective impact partnerships require participants to come to a common understanding of the problem and shared goals, to work together and align work in new ways, and to learn from each other. Authentic interpersonal relationships, trust, respect, and inclusion are key elements of the culture that is required for this difficult work to occur. The backbone and other initiative leaders must be proactive in their efforts to create this culture.

8. **Customize for local context**. While the five conditions are consistent across collective impact initiatives, and initiatives benefit a great deal by learning from each other, customizing the initiative for the local context is essential. Initiatives can do their best work when they deeply understand the problem they are trying to solve locally—both from the data and input from the community and from understanding the existing work and coalitions that may be working on similar issues. Customizing the work to fit the local community context enables the coalition to honor, build on, and/or align with existing work and pursue system and program strategies that are most relevant to local needs.

These principles of practice were identified based on the work of the field of practitioners by the Collective Impact Forum in partnership with the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, FSG, the Forum for Youth Investment, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, Living Cities, PolicyLink, the Tamarack Institute, and United Way Worldwide.

Five Conditions of Collective Impact

While our understanding of how to put collective impact into practice has deepened and expanded, the five conditions outlined in the original article *Collective Impact* remain the core of the approach.

- Common Agenda: All participants have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving the problem through agreed-upon actions.
- Shared Measurement: Agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported, with a short list of common indicators identified and used across all participating organizations for learning and improvement.
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities: Engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, coordinating a set of differentiated activities through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

- Continuous Communication: Frequent and structured open communication across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
- Backbone Support: Ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative, including guiding the initiative's vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, establishing shared measurement practices, building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. Backbone staff can all sit within a single organization, or they can have different roles housed in multiple organizations.