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Collective Impact versus Collaboration: Sides of the Same Coin OR Different Phenomenon?

Kelly Prange, Joseph A. Allen and Roni Reiter-Palmon

Abstract

Collective impact is a recently developed concept and approach to solving social problems that rectifies many of the issues associated with isolated impact. We compared collective impact and the formal definition of collaboration and made integrations between the two concepts. Specifically, we explored effective assessment and facilitation methods and applied them to collective impact initiatives in order to facilitate more purposeful implementation of collective impact. We concluded that collective impact is a specific form of collaboration.

Introduction

Communities across the nation face complex social and economic problems regarding health, education, violence, pollution, and others (Mitchell and Shortell, 2000). To address these issues, communities need stable resources and sustainable solutions to create change. Grantors and funders have sought out partnerships as a way to allocate resources to organizations willing to work together to address these difficult challenges (Gallagher, 2014). As collaborations and social change initiatives have increased in the past 20 years, many terms have been used to describe the phenomena of organizations partnering and collaborating to impact the community, including community engagement, community involvement, civic engagement, service learning, volunteerism, coalitions, and community collaboration.

Although these sorts of collaborations are often the kind that funders seek, they are often characterized by a single organization trying to make the most impact with the fewest resources. This type of system is common in the non-profit world and is called isolated impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Isolated impact results from grantors seeking to satisfy a specific goal when allocating funds: Invest in the initiatives that use the least amount of resources to make the greatest impact. This traditional system produces programs that often have little to no measurable, lasting effects on communities and are only focused on the short term rewards and costs (Kania, Hanleybrown, and Splansky Juster 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Community leaders and organizations use trial and error in an attempt to find a more effective approach to solving social problems, and they may have found an alternative approach: Collective impact (Allen, Miles, & Sternberg, 2014; Irby & Boyle, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011; Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a full definition of collective impact and identify the steps needed to carry out such an effort correctly and most effectively. In doing so, we will also attempt to compare collective impact to collaboration in a meaningful way, illustrating that collective impact is a specific form of collaboration, and bridge the science/practitioner gap. By tapping into the science of collaboration, we then provide suggestions for how to integrate a more collaborative framework into collective impact, particularly from an assessment perspective.

Collective Impact

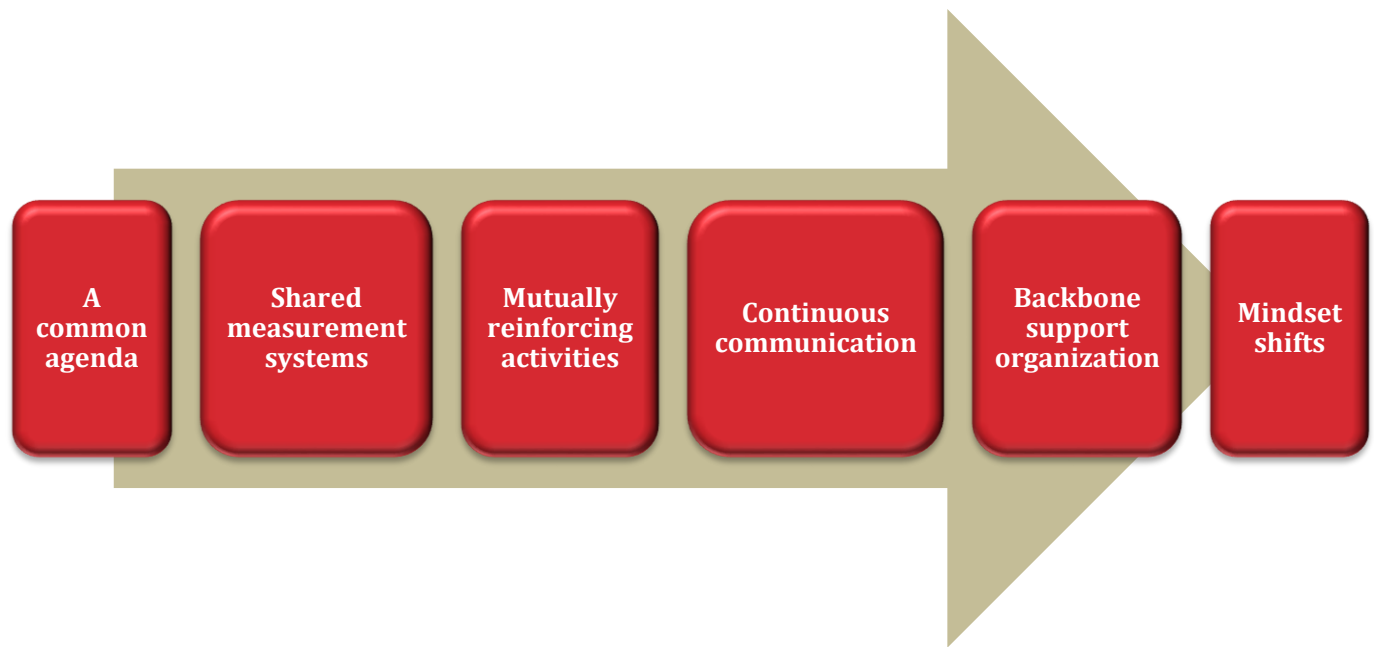
Collective impact is a new collaboration format designed to put an end to isolated impact and short-term solutions. This new approach to mending social issues was first explained using case studies and given a formal definition in the literature in 2011 by Kania and Kramer. In order for the inventive strategy to be

practiced and implemented, Kania and Kramer introduced the concept of collective impact and provided a definition in the Stanford Social Innovation Review: “The commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem” (36). John Kania, in an interview at the 2015 Tamarak conference, mentioned that the idea of collective impact has existed in some form for decades, but now it is being re-branded with new language. Most importantly, people are realizing that there is a need for a new form of partnership and are becoming more interested in learning how to make a continuous impact in their communities. People are searching for solutions, and collective impact may be the answer.

According to Kania and Kramer (2011), efforts to collaborate amongst organizations have not produced the desired outcomes because they do not result in a sustained alignment of goals across the organizations. Further, Kania and Kramer explain that the root of collective impact’s success stems from its key characteristics. Their research has identified five characteristics of collective impact initiatives that lead to successful outcomes (Kania, Hanleybrown, & Juster 2014):

- (a) *A common agenda.* This characteristic allows community members to align their interests and their resources in a meaningful and sustainable way. A common agenda is not only a common goal – it is a shared understanding of how to reach that goal and what the problem is.
- (b) *Shared measurement systems.* Assessment provides information about whether the initiative is successful. Without a common agenda, it is difficult for collaborators to agree on what needs to be measured to define success of the venture. This step is complex, because no two organizations use the exact same measurements. However, in order to be able to report results and come to reliable conclusions, agreement on when and how the outcomes will be measured is essential (Parkhurst and Preskill 2014).
- (c) *Mutually reinforcing activities.* Cross-sector coordination (i.e. coordination between organizations that perform varying functions and a variety of services/products) does not require many organizations doing the same activities, but rather managing the expertise and strengths of each organization so that it can own a specific part of the project. However, each organization needs to be acting in tandem with the rest and in alignment with the common agenda.
- (d) *Continuous communication.* Continuous, regular, and structured communication has been identified as paramount in creating trusting relationships between collective impact participants. Without the investment of a lot of time and conversation, the first two steps would be difficult to achieve.
- (e) *Backbone support organizations.* The backbone support organization fulfills the role of facilitator, project manager, and data manager for the collective impact initiative (Kania and Kramer 2011). Staff at the organization provides administrative support and coordination between all participating organizations to ensure that the project overcomes obstacles and moves forward. In this way, collective impact diminishes competition between social change initiatives through encouraging collaboration rather than isolated impact (Irby and Boyle 2014).

These five characteristics are profound, difficult to attain, and, as research shows, worth the investment (Parkhurst & Preskill, 2014; Stewart, 2013). Relatively few social change initiatives can designate their collaboration as collective impact because its characteristics challenge organizations and community members to shift their way of thinking from traditional approaches.



Collective Impact Mindset Shifts

Collective impact is a new “buzz word” in the non-profit world. One of the potential problems with it becoming popular so quickly is that everyone will use the term without having a deep understanding of the challenges of implementing a collective impact initiative. Further, many who use the term may not be fully aware of what makes it different from every other type of collaboration. Organizations planning to use collective impact must understand how to use it correctly by intentionally putting in place the mechanisms for a successful collaboration effort described above. Collective impact helps facilitate change in communities, and it does so in an intentional way (Gallagher, 2014), which means organizations should employ collective impact initiatives by purposefully setting the stage for a successful collaboration. Doing so requires leaders to reject traditional ways of thinking about social change. Specifically, Kania, Hanleybrown, and Splansky Juster (2014) refine Kania and Kramer’s (2011) five characteristics by adding that three mindset shifts must take place within leaders and organizations to maximize the effectiveness of a collective impact approach.

The first mindset shift *requires getting the correct people involved to help a specific problem* (Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014). Collective impact calls for cross-sector coordination, rather than isolated impact or a solution implemented by an individual organization. It is not just the number of organizations involved or the type of organizations that matters, but identifying the most well-equipped and well-positioned organizations to be engaged in the initiative (Irby & Boyle, 2014; Bartczak, 2014). Therefore, multiple organizations must be involved, but also the *right* organizations should be collaborating to facilitate the sustainability and longevity of the project. This shift also includes identifying meaningful collaborators who have personal experience with the social issue collaborators are trying to rectify. People who have experiences with the problem will be able to provide valuable insight as the collaboration evolves. Sometimes, this mindset shift includes getting the target population involved with the process.

The second mindset shift requires that *collaborators change the way they work with one another* (Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014). This includes (a) the realization that the relational aspect of change is just as important as the rational aspect. The rational side of collaboration is important, but, just like in sales, sometimes it is not the enticing product or low prices that makes a sale—it takes a relationship built on trust. This shift also includes (b) trusting the structure of collective impact to guide

partners' solutions instead of finding one path to solving the problem and sticking with it. The structure of the initiative should enable people to interact and learn, and through that process, new ideas develop. Because isolated impact has been rewarded in the past by grant funding agencies, it is difficult for organizations to focus on the total, collective impact rather than (c) take credit for their individual part in the process. Doing so poses the risk that an individual organization may veer from the collective vision.

The last mindset shift asks proponents of change to *understand that social issues relentlessly change and our solutions must adapt to the change* (Bartczak, 2014; Kania, Hanleybrown, & Splansky Juster, 2014). Previous collaboration efforts have focused on implementing pre-determined, replicable solutions. Kania, Hanleybrown, and Splansky Juster, (2014) assert that collaborators recognize the need for adaptation when they start thinking in terms of developing relationships and channels of communication for people to interact. This enables communities to think of their intervention as part of the larger context of the community and figure out how social change initiatives can fit together to instigate social reform.

Collective impact has distinct characteristics that set it apart from other partnering efforts focused on solving social problems (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The primary aspects that differentiate collective impact from other approaches include the emphasis on assessment and the need of backbone organizations (Easterling, 2013). However, the feature of collective impact that makes it fundamentally different and more successful is that it adopts a collaborative, rather than a competitive approach to solving social problems. Appley and Winder (1977) called for a movement away from competitive approach where individual and isolated impact gives way to a new value system that includes collaboration. As Trist (cited in Appley & Winder, 1977) states, "Evidence is mounting that the individual by himself, or indeed the organization and even the policy by itself, cannot meet the demands of these more complex environments. A greater pooling of resources is required; more sharing and more trust." Forty years ago, researchers recognized a need for change and collaboration in order to have a fully functioning society. The time has come to put those thoughts and ideas into action.

Collaboration Makes Collective Impact Work

Collaboration and its corresponding values and best practices have become a precise discipline that has been studied by social scientists for decades in the realm of organizations (DiBenigno & Kellogg, 2014), leadership (Finch, 1977), social work (Bronstein, 2003), education (Friend & Cook, 1990), and as a general practice (Wood & Gray, 1991). Practitioners in the non-profit, government, and for-profit sectors talk about collective impact as a form of collaboration, but does the practitioner definition match the scientific definition of collaboration? And, if so, are there scientific principles and findings that are applicable to the concept of collective impact and can be integrated into its definition and best practices? As previously stated, one of the goals of this paper is to bridge the science/practitioner gap by pulling together the two fields of study. To determine what characteristics and findings from collaboration research can inform how collective impact is understood, collaboration and collective impact will be compared side-by-side.

Collaboration as an Academic Discipline

Collaboration is defined as "a joint effort toward a goal" (Harper, 2001, as cited in Kolfschoten, Vreede, & Pietron, 2011), and collective impact is described as "The commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem" (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Kania and Kramer's conceptualization of collective impact fits the definition of collaboration, as multiple organizations are joined together to solve a social problem (i.e., a common goal). This ideal state of collaboration is reiterated in both sets of literatures, and some of the pitfalls are echoed within the research as well. For instance, in both collaboration and collective impact research, experts warn that the

goal may be shared, but the journey to the solution can be a source of disagreement and dysfunction (Easterling, 2013; Wood & Gray, 1991).

Moreover, a common pitfall of partnerships is trying to follow multiple goals, or starting the project with one goal, and then organizations branch off in order to accomplish solitary objectives, which distract from the primary goal. When defining collective impact, Kania and Kramer (2011) point out this potential pitfall and identify practices to mitigate the risk of having multiple goals. For example, having a backbone organization keeps each partner accountable to their piece of the project, and warning organizations against taking credit for their individual actions prevents organizations from getting distracted from the goal. In the same way, collaboration experts recognize the importance of incorporating joint decision-making, having agreed-upon rules, and explicit voluntary membership, and even add those elements to refine their definition of collaboration (Wood & Gray, 1991). In addition, collaboration experts suggest that it is important to find ways in which individual goals can be tied to the broader group or organizational goals (Briggs, Reining, & de Vreede, 2006).

Looking at the two definitions, we conclude that collective impact definitely fits into the academic definition of collaboration and is a specific instance of collaboration. Given this conclusion, there are further comparisons and integrations that can be made between the two concepts. Specifically, we compare collective impact and collaboration in terms of levels of analysis, assessment, and facilitation versus funder roles in order to facilitate a better understanding for the collaborative framework in collective impact initiatives.

Level of Analysis

Collaboration has primarily been studied at the team level and at the organization level (e.g., between departments and teams) (Sharfman, Gray, & Yan, 1991). There is less research on inter-organizational collaborations, which may be another name for collective impact. When changing the level of analysis from the team or group level to an inter-organizational level, the context shifts from the organization to the domain (Wood & Gray, 1991). In the same way, collective impact attempts to instigate *social* change rather than only organizational change or even individual change.

Perhaps an important question to consider is whether collective impact is simply a form of inter-organizational collaboration. Collective impact definitely occurs when multiple organizations interact. However, cross-sector coordination is also a critical component of collective impact. Non-profit organizations work with government and for-profit organizations, and collective impact is most successful when organizations across fields and industries collaborate. An argument for cross-sector collaboration as a distinct, higher level of collaboration may be made. A new science may be forming, as there are opportunities to research the intricacies and characteristics of cross-sector collaboration. Future inquiry into collective impact versus collaboration should consider the cross-sector characteristic and formally test whether the cross-sector characteristic is essential for success. A potential challenge to this is finding two collective impact efforts that are both similar in terms of goals/aims while different in terms of the inter-organizational partners.

Assessment

Assessment is essential to document and evaluate the success of collective impact and social change initiatives. Parkhurst and Preskill (2014) call for a different kind of measurement in collective impact than what is traditionally used to assess collaboration. This requires collaborators to start measuring the progress and process of change holistically instead of simply measuring the outcomes of single interventions. The four levels of a collective impact initiative are the following:

1. Initiative's Context: Anything that influences an initiative's design, implementation, and effectiveness (e.g., economics, demographics, culture);
2. The Initiative Itself: The initiative's design and process;
3. Systems the Initiative Targets: The systems (e.g., public policies) and norms, or patterns of behavior (e.g., perceptions of community members) the initiative is trying to impact;
4. Initiative's Ultimate Outcomes: Overarching goals of the initiative (e.g., decreasing childhood obesity rates in a city).

Approaching assessment of collective impact using this structure requires the involvement of multiple stakeholders because the full picture of social change can only be captured by multiple sources of information. Evaluating these aspects gives stakeholders information from which to make decisions about the future of the collaboration.

In contrast, many aspects of collaboration have been assessed in collaboration literature, such as satisfaction of participants, repeatability, participant commitment, and others. Nabukenya, Bommel, Proper, and de Vreede (2011) identified eleven core success indicators for collaboration, gave definitions for each indicator, and identified ways in which each could be measured (see Table 1). When collaboration initiatives assess all 11 core success indicators, they get a robust picture of the success or failure of the initiative. This allows for the adjustment and improvement necessary prior to any further collaborations in a similar domain.

Taken together, the levels of collective impact initiatives and the success indicators for collaboration set forth a potentially comprehensive method for assessing overt collective impact initiatives that use cross-sector inter-organizational collaboration. Table 1 provides the definitions of the 11 core success indicators and a column that highlights how they map onto the four levels of collective impact initiatives. Interestingly, many of the measures appear to capture more than one of the levels.

Table 1

Eleven Core Success Indicators by Levels of Collective Impact Initiative

Collaboration Indicator	Description	Measurement Means	Operationalization Tools	Collective Impact Level
Satisfaction	An effective response with respect to the attainment of goals (process outcomes; and the process by which the outcomes were attained)	The output achieved versus output planned	(i) Session outcome questionnaires with participants, problem owner, facilitator (ii) Focused inter-views with problem owner and participants	Ultimate
Group productivity	The outcomes achieved over the resources used in a collaborative process in order to arrive at satisfactory results	(i) Number (quantity), uniqueness and importance (of each unique) of contributions (ii) Amount of resources used to get results	(i) Transcribing reports/data logs to determine quantity and quality of results from the process (ii) Session process questionnaires with participants, and problem owner	Initiative
Repeatability	Different groups working on different collaborative tasks should produce similar collaboration patterns when they execute the process; i.e. the same process could be applied successfully in each workshop with different groups and focusing on different collaborative tasks	(i) The extent to which the same collaborative task can be applied in different organizations; or, with different groups in same organization (ii) When it is domain focus within task; we measure the extent to which different foci in context	(i) Direct observations (ii) Focused interviews with participants (iii) Documentary analysis	Systems and Context

		of task, e.g. different types of incidents in IRP, or different types of requirements in EasyWinWin, can be applied		
Organizational Adoption rate	The extent to which organizational stakeholders easily get used to the collaboration process in their work practices	How long it takes an organization to get used to the process or actually uses it	(i) Focused interviews (ii) Documentary analysis	Initiative and Systems
The sustainability of deployed work practice	The use of the work practice as the standard way of executing the task without ongoing support from experts outside the organization	(i) Practitioners executing the process themselves without external/expert facilitator help; (ii) The collaboration process being accepted/ adopted as the organizational standard process (iii) Practitioners being able to fix the collaboration process when it is broken	(i) Direct observations (ii) Documentary analysis	Initiative and Context
Transferability	The extent to which practitioners can be successfully trained in executing the collaboration process and understand how to execute it	The collaboration process should not cause a high cognitive load on the practitioner while executing it	(i) Direct observations (ii) Focused interviews with practitioners	Ultimate and Systems
Creativity of participants' contributions	The identification of solutions that are feasible to implement, and fall outside the set of known solutions	(i) New and unique solutions (ii) Appropriateness and quality of solutions	(i) Transcribing reports/data logs to evaluate quality of results from the process by domain experts (ii) Session outcome questionnaires with problem owner	Initiative
Perceived gain in collaboration process' efficiency	The degree to which there is perceived savings of the amount of resources required for attainment of the goal	The actual resources used versus planned resources, e.g. Time (duration), effort, costs, etc...	(i) Session process questionnaires (ii) Focused interviews	Initiative and Systems
Perceived gain in collaboration process' effectiveness	The extent to which there is perceived effort for a group to achieve its goal	The quality of results in a traditional way of doing things versus quality of results in a new way of doing the same things;	i) Session outcome questionnaires with participants (ii) Focused interviews with problem owner, and participants (iii) Direct observations (iv) Quantitative outcome analysis	Initiative and Systems
Participant commitment	The collaboration process should not be complex, and should be easily understood by practitioners, i.e. the process should be easy for the practitioners to learn and execute routinely	Number of times a collaboration process is executed by practitioners with ease e.g. being able to modify, make reviews routinely.	(i) Direct observations (ii) Focused interviews with participants	Initiative and Ultimate
Ease of use	An assumption of an obligation to expend resources to fulfill the terms of a proposal	(i) Positive versus negative remarks towards accomplishment of the execution of the process; (ii) The willingness of participants to commit their time or resources	(i) Direct observation (ii) Focused interviews with participants	Context

For example, sustainability is likely an initiative goal as well as largely dependent upon the context in which the initiative takes place. As such, the assessment of sustainability would have implications for both levels of collective impact. Collaborators can use the facets put forth by Nabukenya, Bommel, Proper, and de Vreede (2011) to guide their assessment of collective impact initiatives. In this way, it will be easier for partners to ensure that all aspects of the initiative are being captured by their evaluation of the collaboration.

Funders/Grantors and the Role of Facilitator

As previously mentioned, isolated impact has become the foundation on which grantors allocate funds to organizations (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Following that system, grantees must demonstrate how their

organization will make the greatest impact with the smallest amount of resources, and it creates a competitive cycle in which non-profit organizations are pitted against one another and social change efforts are isolated from each other. In addition, non-profit organizations are being separated from for-profit organizations in their quest for solving social issues. Collective impact calls for the goals of grantmakers to change; grantmakers must identify organizations who have a common goal when allocating funds.

In addition, the *role* of grantmakers must also change. Easterling (2013) points out that grantors are in a unique position to lead and organize collective impact partnerships because of their extensive knowledge of the many organizations relevant to solving the problem. In this way, grantors can act as a facilitator as the collaborations form and evolve to impact social problems (Bartczak 2014). In collaboration literature, facilitation has been studied in its own right because facilitation and leadership are an essential part of collaboration (Clawson, Bostrom, and Anson 1993). There are multiple dimensions of the facilitator role (Clawson, Bostrom, and Anson 1993). The facilitator influences a collaborative effort profoundly, by acknowledgement and creating standards. However, training is needed to mitigate the facilitator biasing the group (Griffith, Fuller, and Northcraft, 1998), just as it is important that the funders do not force organizations to collaborate in social change partnerships like collective impact (Bartczak, 2014). Collective impact experts also discuss the role of the backbone organizations to provide support and ensure collaborators are aligned toward the ultimate goal (Irby & Boyle, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011).

Therefore, collective impact calls grantors to become facilitators of collective impact issues – something that is easy to say but not easily achieved. A shift to collective rather than isolated impact must start with funding agencies choosing to allocate resources to proposals that offer a collective impact approach to solving problems. Then, the role of grantors must also change to one of facilitation in order for the collective impact initiatives to be sustainable for the long term.

Conclusion

In summary, collective impact is indeed one type of collaboration format, which is designed specifically to solve a multi-faceted and complex social problem by banding together multiple organizations from different sectors with a common goal. Because this approach is relatively new, we have reiterated why it is important to be intentional when implementing a collective impact initiative to include all of its distinct characteristics – to ensure that the initiative is successful, sustainable, and an efficient use of resources.

We encourage those who practice collective impact to understand what level of analysis their initiative is using, how they will measure and inform the future of the initiative, and who will act as the facilitator of the initiative. We also challenge grantors and funders to shift their way of thinking when allocating resources to organizations. Going forward, it is important for practitioners in universities, non-profit organizations, and all sectors to continue refining the definition of collective impact and the best practices in organizing, implementing, and sustaining collective impact initiatives. Finally, we have drawn parallels between collective impact and collaboration. Collaboration has been studied extensively as a domain. There is much that we can learn from past research on collaboration and apply to collective impact.

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