

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Q&A **Roundtable on Collective Impact** Moderated by Eric Nee & Michele Jolin

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Roundtable on Collective Impact

On June 4, a dozen social sector leaders gathered in Washington, D.C., to discuss the ways in which growing numbers of communities are aligning resources and pulling together to create significant change on a community problem—an approach called collective impact.

THE WINTER 2011 ISSUE of *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR) featured the article “Collective Impact,” by John Kania and Mark Kramer. The authors offered a model for social change—called collective impact—based on organizations working collectively to solve a problem using a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organization.

The article struck a chord, particularly with the many people who had become frustrated at the lack of progress being made toward solving difficult community-wide problems. Although individual organizations or programs are having a significant impact, community-wide challenges are often too complex and too large for any single actor to fully address on its own. Most efforts at community collaboration have been well intentioned but have not achieved significant results.

Inspired by the article, the White House Council for Community Solutions, a group appointed by President Obama in December 2010, decided to look more closely at the collective impact strategy to identify where community collaborators have actually moved the needle on a problem and to better understand why they were successful. The council identified a dozen communities where all sectors have pulled together to achieve 10 percent or more progress on a community-wide metric, and more than 100 other communities that are moving in this direction. On the basis of these

successes, the council created a framework and a set of tools to help other community efforts.

To better understand this movement and the lessons being learned, SSIR hosted a gathering of a dozen community leaders and policymakers to discuss collective impact. The meeting was held on June 4 at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C. It was moderated by Michele Jolin, a member of the council and managing partner at America Achieves, and Eric Nee, managing editor at SSIR.

The roundtable participants were in the US capital to attend the

council’s final meeting. As Patty Stonesifer, council chair and former CEO of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said, the collective impact approach “was exactly what the president and the White House were asking us to look at.” She added, “In the nonprofit, business, and government sectors, there was a shared recognition that it was time to work collectively on the issues that face us at the community level.”



ERIC NEE



MICHELE JOLIN

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS:

JOHN BRIDGELAND, president and CEO, Civic Enterprises

BEN HECHT, president and CEO, Living Cities

MICHELE JOLIN, managing partner, America Achieves

LUCRETIA MURPHY, co-chair, Raise DC; president and CEO, See Forever Foundation

ERIC NEE, managing editor, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*

NORMAN RICE, president and CEO, The Seattle Foundation; former mayor of Seattle

PAUL SCHMITZ, president and CEO, Public Allies

JIM SHELTON, assistant deputy secretary for Innovation and Improvement, US Department of Education

STACEY STEWART, executive vice president, United Way Worldwide

PATTY STONESIFER, chair, White House Council for Community Solutions; former CEO, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

MARY LOU YOUNG, president and CEO, United Way of Greater Milwaukee

NANCY ZIMPHER, chancellor, State University of New York; co-founder of Strive

Michele Jolin: I’d like to start by asking why collective impact is resonating now with so many people and organizations.

Patty Stonesifer: I go back to that great African proverb “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” We looked for star performing organizations and leaders that were going fast and putting great results on the chart and backed them, individually, to create the changes we all believe are important. But when we had a few more years of experience

and looked more broadly we saw that even when those individual organizations were showing progress, the overarching problems weren't improving and the community-wide results weren't adding up to much.

So when we read John and Mark's article ["Collective Impact"], almost all of the leaders that I know in the nonprofit, business, and government sectors had an "Aha!" moment, a shared recognition that it was time to work collectively on the issues that face us at the community level in order to see community-wide results.

Paul Schmitz: The fragmentation, the competition, and the turf in the nonprofit sector are massive impediments to solving problems. What woke me up to the need for a different approach was a headline that I read in the Milwaukee newspaper two years ago that said African-American children in Milwaukee had the worst fourth-grade reading scores in the country. The week before I had literally read a major youth organization's appeal about all the outcomes they were achieving for thousands of kids in the city. So I began thinking, "Okay, if you're having all those successes, then why do we have the worst fourth-grade reading scores in the country?" Not too long after that I read about what United Way in Milwaukee was doing about teen pregnancy, and their collective approach intuitively made a lot more sense.

Jolin: Stacey, United Way recently made a big shift toward focusing on how local United Ways can help drive collective change. What inspired this shift?

Stacey Stewart: I realize it sounds like a bad joke, but United Way started about 125 years ago in Denver when a rabbi, a priest, a minister, and a woman volunteer came together and began looking around the city saying, "The social problems here are beyond our individual ability to deal with them. What can we do together?"

In many ways our new business model is going back to our roots. Over time, United Way became a big engine for raising and allocating funds to worthy community efforts. But at the core of who we are is an organization that says, "We're going to focus on the outcomes in the community that can be measured, where we can have effective and effi-

cient activities channeled toward that activity, measuring those outcomes, and pulling together all of the right stakeholders to address the issue."

Today we're seeing many local United Ways finding their roots and figuring out how to exercise their influence in a community to move the needle in important ways. The teen pregnancy work that United Way in Milwaukee is leading with other partners is one example of that.

Ben Hecht: United Way is a great example of an older institution that is saying, "The results we thought were going to happen based on the way we did business didn't happen. So how do we change?" United Way, United Negro College Fund, and other older organizations are saying, "We need to do business differently." That's a really powerful thing.

Eric Nee: Strive has been held out as an example of collective impact. Nancy, what inspired the creation of Strive in Cincinnati?

Nancy Zimpher: When I was president of the University of Cincinnati, several of us approached the school district and said, "We think we can be helpful." I know that sounds like "We're the university and we're here to help you." And, of course, that was a big part of the problem. We said we wanted to help with teacher development, community lighthouse schools, and access to college. The school district and the board of education literally said, "We do teacher development. You don't. We do wraparound schools. You don't. But I guess since you do educate people in college, if you want to fiddle around with access, we're doing that, too, but you can play in that box."

So we started playing in that box and bringing people to the table to discuss the narrow issue of college access. Of course, starting the process at 11th and 12th grade to improve access to college is way too late, but that's where we started. Then the school district said, "Well, you can't do that without us." Once people in Cincinnati realized that we weren't kidding, that we were going to stay at the table, and that this was too big



to fail, people began to take us seriously—at least our persistence if not the agenda.

Nee: Mary Lou, what catalyzed United Way's work in Milwaukee?

Mary Lou Young: I'd agree that the key ingredient is commitment. And that commitment comes because of a crisis, when the community puts a stake in the ground and says "Enough." That's what happened with teen pregnancy. In 2005 we were listed as having the second highest rate of teen births in the country. At the same time, our businesses were looking at why the cost of health care in Milwaukee was higher than any Midwestern city. We also had data that said 71 percent of teen moms were impregnated by men who were 20 years old or older. That's an ugly, unattractive conversation to have, but the fact of the matter was that our children were being sexually victimized.

One of the reasons United Way became involved is that we are a neutral party. We have the ability to engage a multitude of stakeholders with a variety of views, and our agenda is, for the most part, to improve the quality of life for people in our community.

For the initiative to work we all had to learn to respect the work of everybody in the room. Too many community conversations end at that point because some people would say, "I can't abide having anyone who doesn't take an evidence-based approach to teen pregnancy prevention." And others would say, "I can't abide having Planned Parenthood in the room." To succeed you have to have both. The beauty of a collaborative approach is that for the first time

you finally air your dirty linen. You look at what's worked and what hasn't worked. You look at your vulnerabilities.

Schmitz: Vulnerability is a big part of the process, being able to admit that what you are doing hasn't worked. Perhaps that is what distinguishes this approach from most collaborations I've been a part of. In the past when groups came to the table it was a chance for them to bang their chests about how great they were and figure out how they could get their piece of the action out of the collaboration. This reversed that in a way. Now the small grassroots groups can say to the larger ones, "No, they're not solving the problem." That vulnerability takes that power dynamic and turns it on its head.

Norman Rice: Too often we come to the table with the idea that we know how to solve an issue and everybody else is supposed to follow. Instead, we have to ask people in the community, "How is this problem affecting you? If you had the choice of solving it, what would you do?" Doing this allows everyone to get a common perspective and build a consensus of how to move forward. That is important, because at the end of the day the community has to think that they own this issue, not the organization, not the community foundation. If you do that, the initiative grows exponentially and generates new ideas and new innovations.

What is so hard about collective impact is that too often we don't invest enough time teaching people how to be community engagers. You've got to train people how to go out in the community, to hear what people say, and to build on what they say.

John Bridgeland: That's true. I had an experience a number of years ago [leading the National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic] when we were looking at all of the efforts to boost high school graduation rates. Looking at research dating back to 1870, we found that nobody had ever listened to the customer—the young people who had made this dramatic and often tragic decision to drop out of high school.

By talking to them we discovered the complexity of these young people's lives, the number of people who are caregivers at age 16 for a mom, a grandmother, or someone in

the home. The young boys who felt they had to go out and get a job at an early age. What was significant about this process of listening was not just that it gave us a better understanding of the complexity of the problem, but that it also gave us the hope that this was actually a fixable problem. Most of the young people could have made it.

Jolin: When the White House Council looked at the 12 communities that had moved the needle, all of them said that authentic community participation was important, and yet all of them said they didn't think they necessarily did it well. Why do you think it has been so difficult?

Lucretia Murphy: One reason why "authentic" community participation is hard to do is that the complexity happens at the community level. As a provider you tend to focus on the outcomes. "I want to help you be educated." If you listen to the kids, however, the first things she's going to say are "I'm hungry. I don't have a place to live.



A 20-year-old has impregnated me, and he was supposed to help me take care of my baby. And now he's not."

As the education provider you have to change course and say, "Wait a minute. If I'm going to help you become educated, it's important that we connect you to people who will help you overcome your other challenges." What makes the process authentic is that the participants in the collective impact initiative are willing to hear how complicated the problem is. Then everybody owns their piece of the problem and how it is impacting the people trying to make change.

In D.C. we are at the very beginning of the process. We've spent a year without even telling the broad community what was going on. That's because there has been so much "collaboration" in D.C. on education that has not moved the needle, and also resulted in so much controversy, that no one ever wants to collaborate again in D.C.

So for the first several months we went to people whose names were listed on the other collaborations around education and asked, "Why did you do this? What do you think didn't work? What would you like to see happen next time? What messages should we never say if we want your compatriots to participate again?"

Zimpher: Your point about overcoming failure is very important. In Rochester (New York) they had a Children's Zone. It bombed badly. I'd sooner be working in Rochester from nothing than trying to overcome that effort. And in Milwaukee, the Milwaukee Partnership was a bold idea, but it stalled. Overcoming those failed collaborations to

start a new conversation is very difficult. It's a real challenge for collective impact.

Stonesifer: People have spoken about speaking truth to power, but one of the things the council saw in the case studies we examined is that what people first did was speak truth to themselves. Within their own organizations they were able to say, "We're not moving the needle. We can't keep putting these numbers up for the next board meeting in order to feel good. We have to accept that as United Way, as Funder X, as University Y we are not meeting our goals."

Hecht: There are two sides to that coin that are important. One is self-reflection, which has been hugely missing from most organizations. One of the reasons that collective impact is picking up is that more people are reflecting. The other side of the coin is that you actually have to have a point of view about a problem. You can either sit back and wait for people to say, “I need a new gym floor,” or you can say, “We believe teen pregnancy is a major problem. And we, as the community foundation or United Way, are going to put our efforts into solving it.”

Nee: What role do funders play in the success of collective impact?

Stonesifer: Funding is a gigantic challenge. In the case studies that we looked at, the vast majority of successful collaboratives were funded pretty close to home. That is going to continue to be important because there needs to be a trusting funder who says, “I believe in my own responsibility here, and I believe this collective is going to work hard at it.”

National funders are also building relationships with certain local leaders and will get behind them. Most often though, it’s going to start with the community founda-

who wants to do the same thing in New Orleans that Nancy did in Cincinnati. But he doesn’t have many big funders in New Orleans. And they’re pretty tapped out from the challenges of the last seven years.

Hecht: We’re a collaborative of 22 national funders. We are largely using local organizations that have some momentum on these new initiatives, what we call civic infrastructure. We’re funding only through those. Some of our resources are going toward the glue or the backbone organization that you need to make the collective work. It’s one thing to say you all want to work together, but we know that you can’t work together unless someone’s actually helping you work together. That’s because everybody at the table, by definition, has another job.

Jolin: What role do national networks, like United Way, play in the process?

Stewart: United Way’s work in Milwaukee has given us the ability to describe a model that other United Ways can look at and say, “Here’s how it can work.” We’ve spent about a year and a half figuring out how to align and create interdependence and mutual accountability across our network in ways that we’ve

out in D.C. affect kids in Milwaukee. There’s a lot of similarity underlying those issues, or issues like health and income. And so what we’re trying to do now is figure out how we leverage all of that expertise and work and pull it together as a cohesive network. We’re not going to have a cookie-cutter approach to these issues, because every community is different. But often the issues are so similar and the strategies can be so similar that there are opportunities to look at a network and figure out what are the two or three things that we could actually elevate and work on together that could give us more national lift and movement.

Nee: Jim, we’ve talked about the role of the funder. What about the role of government?

Jim Shelton: The biggest potential opportunity is for a collective impact approach at the governmental level. There are silos that cut federal, state, and local government off from one another. There are silos that cut by programmatic area or area of need. We are just beginning to scratch the surface about how you create the kind of coherence and strategy that you want when you go after a problem in a community.

Government needs to move much more in the direction of a place-based strategy and funding so that it can support these models of collective impact. We have a lot to learn about how to do it well. We’re taking small baby steps with our competitive funding. But that’s not where the opportunity is. The opportunity is in the core funding. The big money ought to be deployed against these kinds of results frameworks in ways that are much more complementary.

Bridgeland: Jim is right. Just to give you some context, there are 339 federal programs spending about \$225 billion every year at the federal level to help disadvantaged youth in this country. And more often than not they’re funding systems and organizations that aren’t having much of an impact. Or worse, we don’t know what impact they are having because we don’t have evaluations in place. So the hard conversations that local communities have been having about what’s not working, their vulnerabilities, and their failures is a conversation that may be our moment of truth in government.



PAUL SCHMITZ



JOHN BRIDGELAND



LUCRETIA MURPHY

tion or another local funder so that a national funder sees that local leadership is at the table with risk capital at stake, saying, “I’m staying at the table. Will you match our money?”

There can be exceptions in communities that don’t have the ability to raise money locally. We were just talking to Scott Cowen [president of Tulane University],

never had before. There are now 1,200 local United Ways with their own boards, their own governance, and their own terrific local independent effort. We’re now saying, “You know what? That’s not the way we’re going to move over our next 125 years. It’s interesting local work that’s going on, which in some ways is unique, but it’s not that unique.”

The same issues that cause kids to drop

But there are hope spots within government funding streams. One example is a program that emerged out of the New Market Initiatives called Youth Opportunity Grants. The reason it had some good results is that it funded, fostered, and forced at the local level a level of community collabora-

the data is fragmented. And then officials at all levels layer on lots of laws, regulations, and myths about how you can and cannot use that data. So the first thing is to get much clearer about what data would be useful to whom. In many instances, you don't even know what data will be useful until

you free it and then somebody finds a smart way to use it. We also need to get rid of the urban myths about what you can't do with the data, and we need to clarify the regulations about what you can do with the data.

We're in the process of going through each one of those steps to make almost all of that data open for others to use in a variety of ways. Open and able to use sounds simple, but it's not. To put it in machine-readable format turns out to be a big deal.

sustainable partnership that is in it for the long haul and that can withstand the political winds that will blow, it will just come and go.

Rice: It is not enough just to collect the data. You have to use it to influence those people who make these decisions, or else it goes for naught. Until we hold elected officials accountable for responding to this data, we are going to be at fault.

Young: Your collaborative has to be strong enough that it survives whatever political agenda is going on. I pity a mayor who would not want to be part of our collaborative. Seriously. Our mayor has been with us since the beginning. There's a very strong community desire that the CEO of our city be involved.

Neer: One of the other critical factors in a successful collective impact initiative is leadership. What kind of leadership is needed to be effective?

Young: There has been a fundamental shift in what my board would look for in my successor. In the past they would have looked for a well-connected fundraiser. But I wasn't hired for that reason. I came from a Fortune 500 company [Rockwell Automation] because I was a strategic grantmaker and I knew how to do community impact.

When they replace me they will take it a step farther and look for someone who has a history of credible social change. As organizations become more involved in collective impact, what we're training people to do and what we're looking for in people to fill leadership roles are going to change as well.

Schmitz: It's great to have the charisma and the catalytic leadership that's needed to get the initiative off the ground, but it also requires a very different set of leadership practices. We train nonprofit leaders to be great fundraisers. But this is not that. This is about engaging communities and being vulnerable. It's not about self-promotion of your organization or of you. It actually goes against a lot of the activities that people get rewarded for traditionally. We need to train our leaders to be more collaborative, to be more inclusive, and to have greater integrity. It's a whole different set of practices. ■



MARY LOU YOUNG



BEN HECHT

tion where multiple sectors had to come together and decide what the barriers were to reconnecting young people to school and work. It also rewarded innovation, which is kind of unusual for government.

Jolin: Besides money, another thing the government has a great deal of control over is data. Solving social problems depends on getting good data. A lot of data is already collected by the government, but not all of it is readily and easily available. What can be done to make the data more accessible?

Bridgeland: One area that government has a comparative advantage in is its ability to collect and report good data. What I love about the federal government doing it is that the sample sizes are large. This allows communities and states to compare themselves to one another, and in some instances has fed healthy competition among them. For example, when the governors said "We're going to have a common calculation for graduation rates across the country," that created a sea change. Communities could see where they stood, forcing them to have hard conversations about their schools.

Shelton: The amount of data that the government collects is enormous. The problem is that because government is fragmented,

Murphy: There are a lot of data, but not all of it informs outcomes. You can count how many kids are eligible for a free and reduced meal on which day at which time in your cafeteria, but that is just reporting. Does that really tell you if they ate the food or if the food was nutritious? Having someone in your community who can help the providers and the collaborative understand which data points move us toward the outcomes we want and help with the analysis is really useful. In D.C. we're working with the Urban Institute. They have spent hours going through every data point to help us understand what data, among the hundreds of variables, we really need to measure to achieve our outcomes.

Zimpher: I'm a little worried that collective impact will simply become the next buzzword, and that after a time it will go away. We need to figure out how to stay the course and hold ourselves to some standards of practice that meet the meaning of the term. Further, it doesn't lend itself well to election timelines. And it's certainly not in the mindset of business and a quick return.

Stewart: We have seen many instances when an initiative is around for a few years and then another person gets elected and the whole direction will shift. Unless there is a