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# Learning in Action: Evaluating Collective Impact

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# Learning in Action: Evaluating Collective Impact

## Successful collective impact initiatives embed evaluation in their DNA and use it to make better decisions about the future.

**BY MARCIE PARKHURST & HALLIE PRESKILL**

As leaders across the social sector adopt the collective impact approach to problem solving, an important question looms in many people's minds: Given how complex and unpredictable the work is, what is the best way to evaluate a collective impact initiative's progress and success?

Traditionally, evaluations of specific interventions have focused on their results to determine whether or not (and how) they have "worked." But collective impact initiatives involve *multiple* activities, programs, and initiatives, all of which operate in mutually reinforcing ways. Moreover, they aim to change highly complex systems. As a result, merely taking a snapshot of a given intervention's effectiveness at one point does not tell the whole story. To truly evaluate their effectiveness, collective impact leaders need to see the bigger picture—the initiative's many different parts and the ways they interact and evolve over time. For that, they need a new way to approach evaluation. We believe that effectively evaluating collective impact requires the following practices.

First, rather than attempting to isolate the effects and impact of a single intervention, collective impact partners should assess the progress and impact of the changemaking process as a whole. This process includes the initiative's context; the quality and effectiveness of the initiative's structure and operations; the ways in which systems that influence the targeted issue are changing; and the extent of progress toward the initiative's ultimate goal(s). To be sure, the relative emphasis of evaluation will shift as the collective impact initiative matures. For example, an initial evaluation might assess the strength of the initiative itself, and a subsequent evaluation might focus on the initiative's influence on targeted systems.

Second, rather than use performance measurement and evaluation to determine success or failure, collective impact partners should use the information they provide to make decisions about adapting and improving their initiative. To that end, collective impact partners should embed evaluation and learning into their initiative's DNA, rather than treating it as an annual (or quarterly) exercise.

Embracing this comprehensive, adaptive approach to evaluating collective impact requires leaders to do three things differently. As we explain in the sections that follow, they should "ask what," "ask why," and "ask often."

### ASK WHAT

First, collective impact partners should assess the progress and effectiveness of the changemaking process *as a whole*. This exercise requires examining four levels of the initiative: the initiative's context, the initiative itself, the systems that the initiative targets, and the initiative's ultimate outcomes.

***The initiative's context*** | Context refers to everything that influences an initiative's design, implementation, and effectiveness. It includes economic conditions, demographics, media focus, political will, funding availability, leadership, and culture, among other factors. Changes in context are inevitable and often are important in supporting or hindering an initiative's success. For example, just as Washington State's Road Map Project began to form in 2012, its leaders learned that they could apply for a federal Race to the Top district award. They successfully organized themselves and won a $40 million award. The influx of financial support significantly boosted the initiative's capacity and accelerated the implementation of its priority strategies.[1]

To see how changes in context can influence an initiative's outcomes, consider the

## Assessing an Initiative's Design and Implementation

| SAMPLE OUTCOMES | SAMPLE INDICATORS |
|---|---|
| The development of the common agenda has included a diverse set of voices and perspectives from multiple sectors | ■ The initiative's steering committee (or other leadership structure) includes voices from all relevant sectors and constituencies.<br>■ Members of the target population help shape the common agenda.<br>■ Community members are aware of the collective impact initiative's goals and activities. |
| An effective backbone function has been identified or established | ■ Backbone staff effectively manage complex relationships.<br>■ Backbone staff demonstrate commitment to the collective impact's vision.<br>■ Backbone staff are both neutral and inclusive. |
| Quality data on a set of meaningful common indicators is available to partners in a timely manner | ■ Partners commit to collecting the data as defined in the data plan.<br>■ Partners have the capacity to collect and input quality data.<br>■ Partners know how to use the shared measurement system.<br>■ Partners contribute quality data on a common set of indicators in a timely and consistent manner. |

example of the final evaluation for Shape Up Somerville. This Massachusetts-based collective impact initiative focused on reducing citywide rates of obesity and included an analysis of the city's changing demographics. As its leaders noted: "If a community becomes more racially diverse over time, as is the case in Somerville, obesity rates would be expected to rise."[2] Without taking into account local demographic changes, the initiative's collaborators couldn't fully understand the effectiveness of its efforts.

***The initiative itself*** | For any collective impact initiative, changing the way organizations and individuals interact with each other and approach complex problem-solving is an important, if often implicit, goal. The real power of the collective impact approach lies in the process—the ability to unite diverse groups around a common purpose, encourage open discussion and ongoing communication, support coordination and alignment of activities, and promote learning and continuous improvement. For example, an evaluation of Vibrant Communities, a pan-Canadian anti-poverty initiative, found that the "multi-sectoral nature of Vibrant Communities helps government move on [policy] change because proposals are already vetted from multiple interests in the community."[3]

Similarly, Shape Up Somerville attributes its success largely to its "multi-level approaches to promote active living and healthy eating."[4] The initiative engaged public schools, city government leaders, academic researchers, civic organizations, community groups, businesses (including restaurants), and residents in an integrated approach to problem solving that facilitated systems-level change. Ultimately, the initiative succeeded in decreasing childhood obesity rates throughout the city of Somerville.[5]

Assessing the progress and effectiveness of the collective impact changemaking process as a whole requires an explicit focus on the initiative's design and implementation. (See "Assessing an Initiative's Design and Implementation" above.) Although collective impact leaders may question the value of evaluating process, we urge them to pay careful attention to the quality and strength of their initiative itself, especially in its early years. This is a time when critically important decisions are made and learning is invaluable.

***The systems that the initiative targets*** | Most collective impact initiatives have hugely ambitious goals: Not only do they seek to tackle complex problems, but they also try to create large-scale change. Achieving this level of impact, in a way that's sustainable over time, requires collective impact initiatives to make significant changes in systems (by influencing cultural norms, public policies, and funding flows) as well as patterns of behavior (including changes in professional practice or changes in individual behavior). These systems-level changes create the conditions that allow collective impact initiatives to achieve their ultimate objectives. (See "Assessing Systems-Level Changes" below.) Shape Up Somerville, for example, attributes part of its success to a constellation of systems-level changes. These included increased funding for anti-obesity work; healthier menu offerings in public schools and at more than 40 local restaurants; new bicycle lanes and improvements to public park infrastructure; improved nutritional standards in schools and other public institutions; and improvements in physical education equipment, facilities, and activities in schools and after-school programs.

***The initiative's ultimate outcomes*** | As the initiative matures, collective impact partners should keep a watchful eye on their ultimate goals. It is normal for initiatives to make slow or minimal progress toward their goals in the early years, but collective impact partners should expect to achieve meaningful, measurable change within three to four years. They should track this progress over time using the initiative's shared measurement system in addition to more robust evaluations.

### ASK WHY

Collective impact partners should use the results of their evaluative activities to make smart decisions about adapting and improving the initiative. To make such decisions, funders must complement performance measurement activities (which focus on determining *what* is happening) with other types of evaluation aimed at understanding *how* and *why* change is happening.

Collective impact partners can employ three different approaches to evaluation at different points in an initiative's lifetime: developmental evaluation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation. As "Three Approaches to Evaluation" (to right) outlines,

## Assessing Systems-Level Changes

| SAMPLE OUTCOMES | SAMPLE INDICATORS |
|---|---|
| The collective impact initiative is influencing changes in attitudes and beliefs toward the desired behavior change | ■ Individuals view the issues and goals of the collective impact initiative with increased importance, relevance, and a sense of urgency.<br>■ Individuals express attitudes or beliefs that support the desired behavior change. |
| Philanthropic (or public) funding in the targeted issue area/system is increasingly aligned with the goals of the collective impact initiative | ■ Overall funding for the targeted issue area or system has increased.<br>■ Existing resources are directed toward evidence-based strategies in the targeted issue area or system.<br>■ New resources are committed to evidence-based strategies in the targeted issue area or system.<br>■ Funding is increasingly designed to allow for program innovation and experimentation in the targeted issue area or system. |

each approach can help answer different questions. (For more detail on the three approaches, see "Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact," available at www.fsg.org.)

These approaches to evaluation are not mutually exclusive. Collective impact partners can and should use a combination of approaches over time. For example, Vibrant Communities in Canada used developmental evaluation to explore changes in context and potential implications for the initiative, and simultaneously used formative evaluation to refine its existing efforts. Later, the initiative used summative evaluation to look back on its effectiveness and overall impact.

## ASK OFTEN

In the context of collective impact, the purpose of performance measurement and evaluation is to support learning, and the goal is to enable continuous improvement. We suggest that collective impact partners follow these steps to effective evaluation:

***Start early*** | Even before an initiative's shared measurement system becomes operational, collective impact partners can monitor a set of early performance indicators that focus on the quality of the initiative's design and implementation. They can also use elements of developmental evaluation to provide insight into the effectiveness of the initiative's early efforts. For example, an infant mortality initiative in rural Missouri uses developmental evaluation to better understand how contextual factors and cultural dynamics influence the development of the strategy. The partners are working with a team of evaluation coaches to ask such questions as "What does the problem of infant mortality look like from the perspective of different stakeholders in our region, and what are the implications for the design of our collective impact initiative?"[6]

***Embed learning into the initiative's DNA*** | To make learning a regular, active, and applied process, collective impact partners should establish clear learning structures and processes. For example, they can create space for group reflection at the start of meetings or periodically survey participants to identify pressing issues. These processes encourage the partners to exchange information, ideas, and questions and are thus critical to the initiative's continuous improvement.

***Allocate resources appropriately*** | Because learning is central to collective impact success, ongoing investment in performance measurement and evaluation is crucial. For many collective impact initiatives, ongoing measurement requires dedicating a part-time or full-time employee to organize, oversee, embed, and apply lessons learned across the initiative. For others, it means looking for external support in the form of a coach, technical assistance provider, or professional evaluator. The majority of collective impact initiatives will likely rely on a combination of internal and external evaluation resources at different times. Regardless of the composition of the evaluation team, we urge collective impact partners to plan carefully for the financial resources and personnel they will need to support a robust approach to performance measurement and evaluation. After all, as a recent report from Grantmakers for Effective Organizations put it, "When you look at evaluation as a means of learning for improvement, … investments in evaluation seem worthwhile because they can yield information needed for smarter and faster decisions about what works."[7]

## CONCLUSION

Effective collective impact evaluation needs to be multi-faceted, flexible, and adaptive, but it does not need to be exhaustive or extremely expensive. Evaluation efforts come in all shapes and sizes—the scope and scale of any individual evaluation will depend on the time, capacity, and resources available. Moreover, the focus of evaluation (including questions, outcomes, and indicators) will change as the initiative matures. The most effective collective impact initiatives will be those that seamlessly integrate learning and evaluation into their work from the beginning, allow those processes to evolve alongside their initiative, and use them as a guide for the future.

This article is based on FSG's "Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact," available at www.fsg.org. We encourage interested readers to refer to the guide for additional information on how to focus, structure, and plan for collective impact evaluation.

*NOTES*

1 Roap Map Region Race to the Top. http://roadmapracetothetop.org/ Accessed June 16, 2014.

2 "A Decade of Shape Up Somerville: Assessing Child Obesity Measures 2002-2011." White paper, Somerville, Mass.: City of Somerville Health Department, 2013: vii, 1.

3 "Tamarack: An Institute for Community Engagement. Evaluating Vibrant Communities 2002–2010." White paper, Waterloo, Ontario: Tamarack, 2010: 58.

4 "A Decade of Shape Up Somerville." 2013: 6.

5 "A Decade of Shape Up Somerville." 2013: 7.

6 For more information on the Missouri Foundation for Health's work on infant mortality, see "About MFH's Work in Infant Mortality" http://www.mffh.org/content/741/infant-mortality.aspx.

7 Grantmakers for Effective Organizations. n.d. Four Essentials for Evaluation. Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

## Three Approaches to Evaluation

| | DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION | FORMATIVE EVALUATION | SUMMATIVE EVALUATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stage of collective impact development | Collective impact initiative is exploring and in development. | Collective impact initiative is evolving and being refined. | Collective impact initiative is stable and well-established. |
| What's happening? | ■ Collective impact partners are assembling the core elements of their initiative, developing action plans, and exploring different strategies and activities.<br>■ There is a degree of uncertainty about what will work and how.<br>■ New questions, challenges, and opportunities are emerging. | ■ The initiative's core elements are in place and partners are implementing agreed upon strategies and activities.<br>■ Outcomes are becoming more predictable.<br>■ The initiative's context is increasingly well-known and understood. | ■ The initiative's activities are well-established.<br>■ Implementers have significant experience and increasing certainty about "what works."<br>■ The initiative is ready for a determination of impact, merit, value, or significance. |
| Strategic question | What needs to happen? | How well is it working? | What difference did it make? |
| Sample evaluation questions | ■ How are relationships developing among collective impact partners?<br>■ What seems to be working well and where is there early progress?<br>■ How should the collective impact initiative adapt in response to changing circumstances? | ■ How can the initiative enhance what is working well and improve what is not?<br>■ What effects or changes are beginning to show up in targeted systems?<br>■ What factors are limiting progress and how can they be managed or addressed? | ■ What difference(s) did the collective impact initiative make?<br>■ What about the collective impact process has been most effective, for whom, and why?<br>■ What ripple effects did the collective impact initiative have on other parts of the community or system? |