

Collective Impact Without Borders

Successful, multi-national, collective impact efforts require that organizations carefully consider two dimensions of their approach.

By Arani Kajenthira & Philippe Sion Aug. 29, 2017

Since publishing our first article on collective impact—a structured, cross-sector approach to solving complex social problems—in 2011, we have deepened our understanding of what it takes to effectively implement collaborative processes between different sectors. Recently, FSG has been asked to advise on a growing number of efforts that foster funder and grantee collaborations across national borders. Given this increasing interest in using collective impact principles across geographies and cultures, we would like to share what we have learned from launching and advising funder-driven, transnational collaborative efforts. These collaborations are at different stages and aim to address a wide variety of challenges (including social mobility in Israel, fisheries sustainability in Mexico, human trafficking in Brazil, and alternative care in Cambodia).

While collective impact is not always the only or even the most appropriate approach, when conditions are present for a successful, multi-sector collaboration to address a systemic issue in a foreign country, two dimensions require particular consideration.

1. Build relationships and test interest before investing in local capacity.

Over the years, multiple funders have approached us convinced that collective impact principles will deliver transformative impact on a social issue in a foreign context. Typically, these funders are interested in identifying local partners for such an effort, recognizing that they need significant local interest and capacity to successfully move forward.

In Israel, for example, Joel Tauber, chairman of the Tauber Family Foundation, invested in building a relationship with a local funder, the Rashi Foundation, well in advance of launching a collective impact effort called Rise Together Israel. The long-term initiative aims to better integrate investments and services along a cradle-to-career continuum to improve the social mobility of every citizen, particularly young people who have historically struggled to succeed academically and economically. As part of a commitment to engaging all voices from the community, Tauber also spent time in Israel bringing local stakeholders on board by sharing his own experiences with social mobility—in particular, his work mobilizing the Jewish diaspora to support the arrival and integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. “I had seen so many other attempts to address this issue fail before,” Tauber recalled, “that I became convinced that a new approach was necessary to achieve the longer-term impact we were seeking.”

Building relationships with stakeholders on the ground is especially important when working in a developing country. Local organizations can be understandably wary of external groups coming in and pitching a new idea as a panacea for the local community. Many of these organizations are also dependent on foreign funds. Consequently, they may feel pressure to indicate tacit acceptance of new ideas to ensure that they receive adequate funding for operations, even if they are not invested in implementation.

Funders should consider these power dynamics, which detract from the more equitable approach that collective impact embraces, and determine how they can play a backseat role as the effort takes off and becomes more sustainable. This involves investing additional time in explaining the new model, and reassuring actors on the ground that they are aiming to make a long-term investment and maximize the value from existing activities and resources, rather than run a short-term pilot. And rather than attempting to measure population-level outcomes of any such investments in the first 24 months, funders should focus on tracking evidence of stronger relationships between partners that lead to shared ownership of strategy.

It is also important to identify local organizations interested in both championing collective impact ideas and providing backbone support (staff that foster cross-sector communication, alignment, and collaboration), and ideally establish partnerships well before launch.

In Mexico, for example, FSG is supporting an initiative funded by the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) to improve the sustainability of local fisheries. FSG first assessed the interest of local WFF grantees, including Comunidad y Biodiversidad A.C. and Smartfish, in taking a structured, collaborative approach. Grantees were enthusiastic about moving forward but also emphasized the importance of having local leadership. Consequently, WFF is investing in building the expertise of a local team to effectively navigate outreach to additional partners and ensure long-term sustainability of any resulting collaborations moving forward.

Finally, funders working internationally should take into account the availability and reliability of data they need to specify a social problem, and measure an initiative's outputs and outcomes. When there is limited data on the at-risk or target population for a collaborative effort, funders may need to think about how to acquire additional data—for example, by partnering with academic institutions or empowering local organizations to work directly with government to strengthen data collection.

In Brazil, Xavier Plassat—a coordinator at Comissão Pastoral da Terra, which fights rural poverty—developed his own comprehensive dataset to record human rights violations. Plassat leveraged his on-the-ground presence to collect claims from enslaved workers, resulting in a dataset far larger than the dataset law enforcement authorities had. With the vision and support from Humanity United and leadership from the Freedom Fund, organizations like Comissão Pastoral da Terra and government agencies are developing a common agenda that can make use of Plassat's data.

2. Engage early and often with government leaders.

Some countries have a stronger history of reliance on government-run social safety nets than others. In countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Germany, for example, where the government is the primary if not the only provider of social services, there may be an expectation that municipal, regional, or even national government officials will consult with community leaders, nonprofits, philanthropies, and the private sector, develop their own solutions, and manage implementation.

These expectations can present challenges for any attempt to implement a more collaborative process. “Please prepare your recommendations and I will decide,” said one city official we met, in front of private foundation, business, and nonprofit leaders asking for his support. This was not surprising to those who had worked with public sector officials before. However, the reason these non-government actors decided to experiment with collective impact principles in the first place was because of its potential to address systemic issues, and its aim to incorporate more inclusive cross-sector dialogue and decision-making.

As mentioned above, finding the right partner in government and engaging with them early is important. Senior government officials may not have time to participate in all the conversations needed to sustain an effective collaboration over time, so it can help to identify their trusted advisors, who have the ability, willingness, and authority to represent the government perspective but also the bandwidth to take on this liaison role.

In our work in Cambodia with Family Care First, for example, a government official who had trusted relationships with the leaders of several government agencies was willing to play a more active role in a collaborative effort to address child protection issues; he was willing to work within and across departments to increase overall support for the effort. In our experience, some government actors may be more accommodating of a collaborative effort if they clearly understand how they can share the credit for any resulting impact or if they receive other incentives to collaborate.

The five elements of collective impact, and the collective impact principles of practice can make an enormous contribution toward systems change in all parts of the world. Both of the points highlighted here, of course, are also worth considering when implementing a collective impact project at home, but they are essential to efforts that cross borders.
