

## What can collective impact offer?

SIX asked Tara Anderson, Co-Founder and Director of the [Dragonfly Collective](#), a social business working with others to reduce inequality and create a more just world, to share insights on the collective impact approach and what it can offer to social innovation.

*The most entrenched social challenges of our times will only be solved when people and organisations work together – across sectors, across borders and across cultures (local and global). We know this. But while people and organisations have been collaborating for years in many different forms, there has been less embedding of frameworks that enable collaboration to generate significant impact. Collective impact offers one approach with potential, but how exactly do we make it work here? Our recent research on collective impact in the UK offers some suggestions.*

### Our biggest social challenges demand collaboration

During 2015 some of the biggest social challenges of our times took centre stage. Climate change at the [Paris Climate Change Conference](#), health care in developing countries with the Ebola outbreak, immigration with the ongoing ‘[migrant crisis](#)’ and the growing gap between the rich and the poor with calls to ‘[even it up](#)’ just to name a few. Against this backdrop, the [new Sustainable Development Goals](#) were released. Each of the goals represents an entrenched and systemic challenge that requires a joined-up approach – a shift in the way we view and respond to the challenge. They each demand collaboration.

We know this. We’re already talking, already thinking about it, and already doing it. Collaboration has become a buzz word. Or rather, lots of buzz words: collaborative governance, strategic alliances, open innovation, networked governance, distributed public governance, integrated governance, joined-up solutions, collective intelligence ... this list goes on.

There have been [lots of effective and sustained partnerships in the UK and around the world](#). But as others such as Geoff Mulgan have highlighted, collaboration as a discipline seems to be a field that doesn’t learn from the past. And collaborative practices tend to remain on the margins, often deeply antithetical to the normal ways of doing business. There has been limited deep embedding of new, co-productive ways of working, and it would seem the talk about collaboration precedes the substance in some cases. And that may be partly because ...

### Collaboration doesn’t always come naturally

(Disclaimer – this paragraph contains sweeping generalisations in an attempt to make the complex simple. So here we go.)

The Western world is dominated by neoliberal politics, thanks to the 1980s legacy of Thatcher and Regan. Neoliberal ideology puts market-based competition at the forefront, and when that logic is applied to solving social challenges, the result can be disastrous. Competition fosters social innovation processes that are trapped within a single organisation and are limited to one organisation’s beneficiary group. The question becomes not, ‘how can we build on what’s already working?’ but ‘how can I develop my own solution to the problem?’, a discourse fuelled by the dialogue of the ‘[social innovation superhero](#)’.

This effect is all too clear in the number of registered charities in the UK - 164,097 according to the Charity Commission, of which 75% have an annual income of less than £100,000 and 41% less than £10,000 (!). Even in the smallest communities there will be dozens of efforts with similar goals, members, strategies and funders that have never sat together to discuss how their work overlaps.

The narrowing and fragmentation of social change efforts is intensified by the often short-term and project-based nature of available funding and the demand for evidence of 'social impact' that attributes outcomes to the actions of a single organisation or project. And so social change is designed (or retrofitted) to tick boxes on funding applications and look good in an impact report with bar charts all moving in the right direction. But the bigger challenges we're working to fight (poverty, climate change, inequality – the list is long) remain stubbornly in place.

The challenge is not about resources so much as alignment and effective use of the resources we already have.

### **Is there a better way?**

Yes we know that in many cases (but not all) we need to collaborate more. It's a no-brainer – one plus one equals three. But how do we take learning from the past and create a framework that will lead to a step change?

[Collective impact](#) is one attempt to codify an approach to collaboration, in response to the recognition that traditional models of social change weren't going far enough.

It's a structured form of collaboration first written about by two American social scientists – John Kania and Mark Kramer - and has five criteria:

1. Common agenda: all participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
2. Shared measurement: collecting data and sharing results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
3. Mutually reinforcing activities: participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
4. Continuous communication: consistent and open communication is needed across many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives and create common motivation.
5. Backbone support: creating and maintaining collective impact requires a separate organisation(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organisations and agencies.

### **Is collective impact any different to other forms of collaboration?**

Collective impact as a practice is not new. What *is* potentially new however is the codification of it, bringing together a range of collaborative approaches into a cohesive framework.

Collective impact is not a panacea, it is not an end in itself, and is not without its complexities and challenges. But it provides a clearly structured (although complex) approach to collaboration and helps widen a community's vision. It acknowledges the strengths of existing programmes and the assets of the community and builds on them. It facilitates the scope of action required from people and organisations across all sectors in society, simultaneously, at both a local and system-wide level. Most importantly, it acknowledges that a 'backbone organisation' is required to integrate this wide, cross-sector scope of action.

Collective impact is specifically focused on systems change, where all partners consider their impact on the broader ecosystem, not just their own organisations. It acknowledges that large scale social problems are complex, and there is no one single solution, and even

if there was, there is no one organisation or individual that could compel all actors involved to adopt it.

Collective impact also has the potential to transcend traditional sector structures. It starts with a [process of alignment](#) by mapping what's already in place, and brings together those who are best placed as a result of their roles in society to make an impact. It makes solving social challenges a shared responsibility, as opposed to the more traditional approach where government is seen as responsible, the third sector fills the gaps they miss, and the private sector carries on serving itself while offering occasional handouts.

Rather than seeing the problem through the lens of a particular organisational agenda or as one organisation's responsibility, collective impact sharpens a community's collective vision so previously hidden solutions and resources emerge.

### **So what will make collective impact work in the UK?**

Many organisations around the world have begun to use collective impact as an answer to the established need for greater cross-sector collaboration. While there was a [flurry of interest](#) in the UK following the publication of the first collective impact article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, examples of collaboration that use all five criteria of collective impact seem to be less apparent.

We looked at two collective impact projects in London (the [Finance Innovation Lab](#) and [West London Zone](#)) to explore what makes it work in the UK, and what gets in the way. We found five barriers and nine enablers.

#### *Barriers of collective impact*

1. Existing services with established theories of change: in the UK (unlike the USA) many social services are already in place, and those services have established theories of change and an entrenched interest in maintaining the status quo.
2. Time required to build relationships: collective impact is all about chemistry –it's built and sustained on relationships, which take time and patience to develop (years), and time is a resource in very short supply.
3. Ego and power dynamics: collaborative working requires working with other people who may be traditional competitors, so naturally there is some conflict over who gets to be in charge, who takes the credit and who own the risk.
4. The political and cultural climate in the UK: the principle of market-based competition at the heart of neoliberal politics may mean that competition comes more naturally than collaboration to many.
5. Lack of long-term and flexible funding: collective impact requires multi-year funding for general operational costs, linked to long-term and systemic 'social impact', which very few funding institutions are prepared to offer (yet).

#### *Enablers of collective impact*

1. Understand the ideology and values driving the system: changing systems means challenging and changing the meta-narratives, values and ideologies that give the system oxygen.
2. Stand between the margins and the mainstream: to change a system the most creative space is neither embedded within it nor completely outside it.
3. Embrace conflict and contestation: both are natural and essential in order to move beyond the incremental innovations driven by unanimous consent and create more disruptive change.

4. Find the 'coalition of the willing': work with individuals (rather than organisations) who buy into the shared goal and may be 'unusual suspects' - collective impact is a mindset and you have to go where the energy is to make it work.
5. Use the context to create urgency for change: embrace and harness discontent with the status quo.
6. Rethink assumptions about ego and power dynamics: this is one of the most commonly cited barriers, but it can be a self-fulfilling prophecy – conversely the energy generated by a shared purpose means participants will (in general) look beyond individual agendas.
7. Lead by stepping back: while a charismatic champion is crucial, they must lead from behind and instead foreground the work/ideas of project participants combining both humility and strength.
8. Locate the backbone in the third sector: the backbone organisation should be neutral and independent, so the third sector may be the best location for it.
9. Follow a process instead of a tactical plan: collective impact is messy, iterative and emergent - the emphasis should be on the goal rather than the method or structure, allowing for continuous learning rather than a pre-set solution.

A fuller explanation of each barrier and enabler is available in our [collective impact research paper](#).

### **Five things that will support collective impact in the UK**

Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact will not happen organically, and it's not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. Here are our suggested next steps.

1. New backbones.  
The UK needs well-resourced backbone organisations, starting with anyone who has a major piece of the puzzle and a desire to connect the dots. They must have collective impact in their DNA and sit somewhere between the margins and the mainstream. They could be one of two types – those that 'coordinate' and focus on changing individual circumstances in local areas (these generally follow the American model of collective impact) and those that 'transform' and focus on changing institutions and ideologies on a bigger scale.
2. A shared understanding of collective impact across all sectors.  
This could be achieved through forums or conferences (such as the collective impact roundtable to be hosted by NESTA, West London Zone and Generation Change in February 2016) and will rely on sharing practical examples (both from within the UK and internationally).
3. New funding models.  
As Collaborate highlighted in its [funding ecology paper](#), we need a new approach where funding is provided to coalitions, with less prescription about process or outcome in order to address complex and entrenched problems that require a systems approach. Some models are already in development, for example [Collective Impact Capital](#) (a place-based collective impact fund), and West London Zone's [collective impact bond](#).
4. Shared learnings from the pioneers.  
We need an understanding of where collective impact (and other forms of effective collaboration) is already being applied, and networks that create a dialogue about what's working well and not so well. Tool kits will help, and [many have already been developed](#).

5. New measurement systems and methodologies.  
Measurement systems are as much about determining needs and facilitating action-reflection learning as they are about collecting the evidence that collective impact works (or doesn't work, and where adjustments in the approach are needed). New models are already being built specifically to capture the 'impact' in collective impact, see for example [Results Scorecard](#).

### **Today we create our tomorrow**

What is abundantly clear is that to avoid sleepwalking into a future without change we need to keep looking for new approaches, building on learning from the past. This blog was written in a spirit of optimism with a belief that change is entirely possible.

In one sense, collective impact is simply a "codification of common sense" as suggested by West London Zone's CEO. But in practice collective impact work is complex and it's not easy. Some of the barriers identified are not easily shifted. Achieving systems change is a long-term process, and collective impact practitioners must accept that they might not see results in their lifetime.

But that should not stop us from starting now. The will and passion to shape an alternative future already exists. Collectively the future is very much in our hands, if we choose to act together. That may appear idealistic, but perhaps a small dose of idealism is exactly what's required.

John Kania and Mark Kramer, the authors of the original collective impact article, suggest that: "while collective impact remains a messy and fragile process [and] many attempts will no doubt fail ... even the attempt itself brings one important intangible benefit that is in short supply nowadays: hope. That alone may be purpose enough to embrace collective impact".

*Tara Anderson is Co-Founder and Director at [The Dragonfly Collective](#), an international consultancy working with others to reduce inequality and create a more just world.*