How to make a collective impact

In an increasingly interdependent, globalized society addressing many of the complex challenges the world is faced with today requires coordinated action. Today, no single company, organization or government has the resources to solve the world's most complex problems.

Recent work by John Kania and Mark Kramer has described an approach to collective action and change on complex problems called **"collective impact"**. The authors define it as "the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem."

As Kania and Kramer explain "no single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it […] Social problems arise from the interplay of governmental and commercial activities, not only from the behavior of social sector organizations. As a result, complex problems can be solved only by cross-sector coalitions that engage those outside the nonprofit sector."

This approach is new to most funding bodies and non-profit organizations that are used to focusing on situations of **isolated impact**, where a solution is embodied within a single organization.

There are five conditions that are necessary for a successful collective impact initiative:

1. **Common agenda***: All participants should have a shared vision for change that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.

2. **Shared measurement systems**: A shared measurement system collects data and measures results consistently on a short list of indicators for participants and for the evolution of the problem situation.

3. **Mutually reinforcing activities**: The differentiated activities of participants are coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.

4. **Continuous communication**: Communication is essential to develop the necessary trust among nonprofit organizations, corporations, and government agencies.

5. **Backbone support organizations**: A separate organization and staff acts as project manager, data manager, and facilitator and serves as the backbone for the entire initiative.

Collective impact is an ongoing process of alignment, discovery, learning, and emergence. Working on complex problems requires that participants embrace new ways of seeing, learning, and doing that marries **emergent solutions** with **intentional outcomes**. Funders must also change their perspectives and award funding to "support processes to determine common outcomes and rules for interaction that lead to the development of emergent solutions, rather than just funding the solutions themselves."

References

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Winter 2011, pp 36-41.

Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2013). Embracing emergence: How collective impact addresses complexity. *Stanford Social Innovation Review - Blog entry*, 21 January.