

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

Informing and inspiring leaders of social change

Collaboration

Building Many Stories into Collective Impact

For long-lasting, effective change, collaborative efforts must fully engage diverse community voices.

By **Sheri Brady** | Oct. 20, 2015

“If you are not at the table, then you are on the menu.”

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I was recently on a **Community Investment Network** (<http://www.thecommunityinvestment.org/>) conference panel with a woman who regularly shares this adage with the Native American sovereign communities she works with in North Carolina, and the comment struck home. Since our mission at the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions is to support collaboration that helps communities effectively address their own challenges, we want affected community members not just to be at the table, but also to share in cooking the meal. And as co-founders of the **Collective Impact Forum** (<http://collectiveimpactforum.org/>), we believe that collective impact is a promising approach to creating deep social change.

Unfortunately, many of the barriers facing communities are tied to inequities that exist on a structural level (public schools, for example, are funded based on property taxes); this prevents many important voices from participating in discussions or decision-making that affect their lives. To help collective impact live up to its promise of meeting complex problems by creating systems-level change, we must fully engage representatives *from within the communities most impacted by systems change*. If we don't, our efforts may not meet the needs of the entire community, especially groups on the margins.



Equity and Collective Impact

(http://ssir.org/equity_and_colle)
This series will share perspectives on the importance of embedding an explicit focus on equity throughout any collective impact effort.

Thus, as we aim for systems change, it's important that we intentionally apply an equity lens—aptly **defined by PolicyLink**

(http://ssir.org/equity_and_collective_impact/entry/bringing_soul_to_the_work_of_collective_impact) as “just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential”—to the core of our work. We must design collaborative efforts to provide those who will live with the results access into the process, structure, relationships, and trust-building that are vital to success. And especially because collective impact brings together *cross-sector* stakeholders around a common agenda, it simply doesn't work when perspectives are missing.

To achieve equity, all perspectives and voices must be able to enter into the conversation in full voice—they must have power and agency to impact solutions. Otherwise, we run the risk of what author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls “**The Danger of a Single Story**

(https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)”—the danger of believing that a single story represents the experiences of an entire group of people. Without a diverse set of full-bodied voices at the decision table, we might misunderstand each other, or worse, misdiagnose a problem or invest resources ineffectively. Adichie reminds us that stories are implicit exercises in power dynamics; she shares the **Igbo word** (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Igbo_language) *nkali*, which loosely translates as “to be greater than another.” Stories, she says, are defined by the principle of *nkali*: “How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told are really dependent on power.” Adichie talks about power as the ability to not just tell the story of another person or community, but to make it the definitive story of that person or community. Communities must have the space, tools, and opportunity to tell all of their stories—the good, the bad, and yes, even the ugly. This is exactly what successful collective impact efforts should be about: engaging all the stories in a place.

Adichie's talk is a strong reminder that it is impossible to engage properly with a place without engaging with all the stories of that place. This is something that I struggle with personally and that we at the Aspen Forum work hard to build into all aspects of our work. On a personal level, I must be vigilant about remembering to recruit and share stories that don't fully match mine or that I don't expect. My story, for example, is not the only story of a black woman; there is no “typical” story for any one person or community. When looking for solutions to social problems, we must always take several stories into account. Through support and circumstance, I am fortunate to have a seat at many privileged tables, and I believe it is my duty to create space at these tables for as many other voices as

possible.

Creating this space is core to our work at the Aspen Forum—impacted communities must be central to any conversation that aims to “solve their problems.” For example, we actively engage youth in our [Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund](http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund/) (<http://aspencommunitysolutions.org/the-fund/>), which uses collective impact to build education and employment pathways for young people. They share governance of national and local collaboratives, and their stories and feedback feed into our convenings and advocacy efforts. Their voices are important to successfully creating long-term solutions, because they have the lived experience, and can explain what has worked and not worked as they have struggled to succeed. Our role, then, is to put a spotlight on success stories and share best practices across community collaborations, and we hope to enlist more communities to pull together for community-wide progress, while providing them with the tools, support, and resources necessary to achieve results.

I’m not alone in reflecting on the power of community voice. Southeast Seattle Education Coalition’s Erin Okuno recently wrote a terrific piece titled, “[The Danger of the Single Loud Noisy Story from a Community Perspective](https://fakequity.wordpress.com/2015/10/16/the-danger-of-the-single-loud-noisy-story-from-a-community-perspective/) (<https://fakequity.wordpress.com/2015/10/16/the-danger-of-the-single-loud-noisy-story-from-a-community-perspective/>).” She makes some similar points, and we agree that fully including the diverse voices of a community when seeking change is absolutely critical to doing good work. It is reassuring to know that others are also championing this issue.

Anchoring collective impact efforts in equity means understanding the challenges at hand so that we can create the most effective solutions and wisely use scarce resources. It can help us ensure that communities are no longer on the menu but fully represented at the table.



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