

Connected Community Approach And Collective Impact

**Both/And: Reflections on the Connected Community Approach
and Collective Impact**



Collective Impact

Whenever I introduce the Connected Community Approach in a presentation or workshop, inevitably someone will ask me how it differs from Collective Impact? The assumption is often that it is either/or, that they are different frameworks designed to achieve the same thing.

The reality is that, yes, both are innovations designed to grapple with the complexity of systems change and, yes, both recognize that it takes cross discipline/ multiple scale approaches to affect the kinds of change that we so desperately need in society, the major differences, however, lie in the overall purpose and focus of each approach.

	Collective Impact	Connected Community Approach
Purpose	Solve complex issues	Create the conditions for local solutions to take root and grow
Focus	Well defined problem	A community ecosystem that grows stronger over time
Emphasis	Convening towards a common agenda	Supporting multiple agendas that evolve, intersect and change over time
Outcome	Moving the needle on a specific population level issue	Strong social fabric within a geographic context

I would argue that the Connected Community Approach has the potential to be a precondition to Collective Impact, making it both/and rather than an either/or paradigm.

Legacies of colonialism and white supremacy have created inhospitable environments where it is much more difficult for some people to thrive than for others; racism, the climate crises, and gross economic inequities are complex systemic issues. What the Connected Community Approach and Collective Impact have in common is that they are both collective ways for working in complexity.

The Connected Community Approach is a community development framework that helps strengthen community ecosystems. Collective Impact is a social innovation that clearly defines the issue and provides a framework and approach to taking a collaborative, multi-pronged approach to addressing it.

CCA And...

Collective Impact

The Connected Community Approach (CCA) is fundamentally a community development practice: a practice that looks at geographic communities as the focal point for change. CCA sees communities as ecosystems made up of people, organizations, businesses and institutions within or connected to a shared physical environment. By focusing on the health of that ecosystem, the whole ecosystem, CCA's purpose is to design processes that make the environment itself more hospitable. Connected Communities are places of reciprocity. If everyone lived in a truly connected community people would be nurtured by their environment and nurture it in return (we all have much to learn in this regard from Indigenous ways of being).

I've followed the evolution of Collective impact since the early 2000s. At that time, I was part of a dynamic collective actively creating a "by the community for the community" approach to issues of marginalization in the East Scarborough community of Kingston Galloway/Orton Park in Toronto, Canada. This collective became the [East Scarborough Storefront](#) out of which emerged the Connected Community Approach. Back in the early 2000's, I already knew that the approach we were taking had tremendous potential for engaging with and in community differently: we were really onto something, but didn't yet have words for it.

Then, in 2009, I heard John Kania introduce Collective Impact at a seminar sponsored by the United Way of Greater Toronto. I was inspired and captivated because, for the first time I heard someone talk about local change efforts that I thought mirrored what we were doing in East Scarborough.

For years, I tried to figure out how what we were doing fit into the Collective Impact paradigm. The more I and dozens of others began to put words and frameworks around what we were doing with and in community, the more it became apparent that, though Collective Impact and Connected Community Approach had much in common, they were not the same thing. What we were creating in East Scarborough was focused on creating a healthy and equitable community where people could thrive on their own terms and disrupting systems of oppression in how we work with one another across sectors, disciplines and scales: creating the conditions, for transformative change rather than, focusing, as Collective Impact does, solving for one specific population level problem.

Collective impact has gained a lot of traction in communities not just in North America, but around the world. It was designed as a framework, not a recipe and as such, has evolved as each new group takes it on and adapts it to their own context. [Collective Impact Forum](#) in the United States, and the [Tamarack Institute](#) in Canada have become hubs for gathering and disseminating Collective Impact reflections, insights and learnings. Following the thought leadership of hundreds of people involved in these transformational collaborations has continued to fuel the Connected Community Approach: not because Collective Impact and the Connected Community Approach are two versions of the same thing, nor because we sought to in any way replace Collective Impact, but because, as the thinking about the two approaches evolved, the possibilities around both/and began to emerge.

Collective Impact

It was 2015, when The Storefront first released its **Theory of Change**, an early attempt to articulate what differentiated the Connected Community Approach from various other collaborative efforts, including Collective Impact. Around the same time, two seminal thought pieces crystalized for me just what the Connected Community Approach had to offer Collective Impact efforts.

In the Stanford Social Innovation review article, “Bringing Soul to the Work of Collective Impact”, Michael McAfee began questioning, not the value of Collective Impact, but whether there might be something missing that would be critical to success¹:

“I struggled with implementing the framework because, while the “five conditions” of the approach (http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact) —common agenda, shared measurement systems, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, and backbone support organizations—were the right conditions, they were insufficient for the work at hand.”

Richard Harwood of the Harwood Institute, took the query a step further in “Putting Community Back in Collective Impact”²:

“My chief concern here is that robust notions of community can sometimes be left out of collective impact discussions and implementation efforts; indeed, the very nature of community seems at times an afterthought, even sometimes an unwanted nuisance to be minimized. But collective impact efforts must be aligned and calibrated to the context of community – the “civic culture” – in which they are taking place.... Most communities I work with across the country (both large and small) sorely lack conditions that make up a healthy enabling environment, the very same conditions essential to help move a community through different stages of community life.”

It is those very conditions that the Connected Community Approach seeks to create. The Connected Community Approach is designed to support the healthy and equitable development of a community ecosystem. When healthy and equitable processes exist, then, doesn't it follow that collaborative strategies like Collective Impact that seek to engage with and/in communities would be more effective?

¹Bringing Soul to the Work of Collective Impact, Michael McAfee, Stanford Social Innovation 2015

²Putting the Community Back in Collective Impact, The Harwood Institute of Public Innovation 2015

Collective Impact

What the Connected Community Approach seeks to foster:

A sense of belonging and connection
Unlearning of racist, colonial and white supremacist ways of being and acting
Reciprocal learning across culture and difference
Removal of barriers to opportunity
Seamless access to supports people need to thrive
Opportunities for residents and professionals to design solutions together
Opportunities for meaningful civic participation

In a truly Connected Community, strategies, programs, research and funding are all grounded in community contexts. People in the community are the experts of those contexts, disrupting mainstream colonial and white supremacist norms, and introducing each other to cultures and worldviews that are grounded in deeply held values and principles... so that people can work together more effectively to create a healthy and equitable society.

In their 2016/2017 series *Collective Impact 3.0*, Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, two tireless social innovators from the Tamarack Institute, call for Collective Impact to evolve to a place where community aspiration and authentic community engagement are explicit preconditions for success. And as recently as 2022, John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer & Jennifer Splansky Juster called out the essential need to centre equity in Collective Impact efforts³.

³ **Centering Equity in Collective Impact, John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer & Jennifer Splansky Juster, Stanford Social Innovation, 2022**

Collective Impact

Collective Impact 3.0 evolution⁴:

From	To
Management Paradigm	Movement building paradigm
Common Agenda	Community aspiration
Shared measurement	Strategic learning (and shared measurement)
Mutually reinforcing activities	High leverage and systems focus
Continuous communication	Authentic community engagement
Backbone Infrastructure	Container for community change

For some Collective Impact initiatives, therefore, the Connected Community Approach may be the kind of holistic, strength based approach that supports the equity, community aspiration and authentic community engagement that practitioners and researchers are calling for.

It's important to note here that while CCA is focused on community, it is not about downloading responsibility for the wellbeing of a community onto its residents. While residents play an active role in shaping their community, the responsibility for a healthy and equitable society lies with bigger systems players: the way they engage with and invest in communities has tremendous influence on a community ecosystem: transformative change relies, therefore, on systems players collaborating effectively with community based players.

In the current paradigm, governments, institutions and funders often try to address complex issues with simple, one program, one organization solutions. It's not that the ideas, the programs or the organizations aren't good, it is that complex solutions require multiple, connected strategies that work on the ground as well as at scale and that build on each other over time.

⁴Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change, Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, 2017, Tamarack Institute

Collective Impact

Collective Impact and the Connected Community Approach are both responses to the need for collective solutions to complex problems. Collective Impact starts at a systems level and weaves together the strategies and actions of multiple players including governments, CEOs, and community organizations. The Connected Community Approach starts in the community, weaving together local processes and players and connecting local initiatives to larger issues and players at scale.

Each has a framework of how to create change: for Collective Impact, it is the 5 conditions for Collective Impact, and for the Connected Community Approach it is the 10 keys to unlocking the potential of a Connected Community.

THE 5 CONDITIONS OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

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.
Shared Measurement	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
Continuous Communication	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation.
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a dedicated staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

10 KEYS TO UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF CONNECTED COMMUNITIES



Each are facilitative processes: Collective Impact at a systems level and CCA on the ground. CCA, in fact, originally borrowed language from Collective Impact for the facilitator of those processes. Collective Impact introduced the idea of a “Backbone Organization”, and CCA a “Community Backbone Organization” (more recently called a Community Integrator). In Collective Impact, a backbone organization can take various forms and is often nested within governments or foundations. A community backbone organization is always grounded in community and ideally created by the community for the community.

CCA And...

Collective Impact

The Connected Community Approach centres geographic communities as the focal point for transformative change; it does so understanding that changing how we think about and support communities does not just have an impact on the individual communities themselves, but can also have -a transformational impact on institutional, municipal, regional, national and even global systems. If conditions are in place for healthy and equitable communities, it helps to create a healthy and equitable society.

I've been following Collective Impact for years, reflecting on the powerful and radical concept of, not trying to simplify the complexity of systemic issues, but to design collective strategies that address them. I have also read the critiques and heard from communities how they struggle with this large scale systemic approach to issues that people feel in real time on the ground.

I've never actually been involved in a formal Collective Impact initiative, but I have had 20 plus first hand experience of the power of the Connected Community Approach to improve access to services, foster civic engagement, create local workforce development pathways and food systems and help communities respond collectively in times of crisis.

I believe that creating healthier and more equitable community ecosystems is an important systems change objective in and of itself. To that end, we've now created the Catalysts' Circle to support people, institutions and governments who seek to leverage and adapt the Connected Community Approach to their own unique contexts.

As Catalysts' Circle evolves, I wonder if we might find ways for the Connected Community Approach and collaborative systems-change efforts like Collective Impact to become mutually reinforcing in specific contexts? Both community development and social innovation; both micro and macro; both healthy equitable communities and issue specific strategies; both/and wherever possible to simultaneously address the multiple crises of racism, climate and inequities together with the communities that feel their greatest impact.