REPORT SUMMARY:
What is Collective Impact?

*L*arge-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination, yet the social sector remains focused on the isolated intervention of individual organizations.

Most funders, faced with the task of choosing a few grantees from many applicants, try to ascertain which organizations make the greatest contribution toward solving a social problem. Grantees, in turn, compete to be chosen by emphasizing how their individual activities produce the greatest effect. Each organization is judged on its own potential to achieve impact, independent of the numerous other organizations that may also influence the issue. And when a grantee is asked to evaluate the impact of its work, every attempt is made to isolate that grantee's individual influence from all other variables. In short, the nonprofit sector most frequently operates using the *isolated impact* approach. But this is ineffective when it comes to producing systemic and adaptive, long-term, social change. No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it.

So, what *will* produce this kind of change? *Collective impact*

What it is: *Collective impact* is the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific problem.

What it is not: Collective impact is NOT simply collaboration.

Collaboration is nothing new. The social sector is filled with examples of partnerships, networks, and other types of joint efforts. But collective impact initiatives are distinctly different. Unlike most collaborations, collective impact initiatives involve a centralized infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants.

Types of Collaborations	
Funder Collaboratives	• Groups of funders interested in supporting the same issue who pool their resources. • Generally, participants do not adopt an overarching evidence-based plan of action or a shared measurement system, nor do they engage in differentiated activities beyond check writing or engage stakeholders from other sectors.
Public-Private Partnerships	• Partnerships formed between government and private sector organizations to deliver specific services or benefits. • They are often targeted narrowly, such as developing a particular drug to fight a single disease, and usually don't engage the full set of stakeholders that affect the issue, such as the potential drug's distribution system.
Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives	• Voluntary activities by stakeholders from different sectors around a common theme. • Typically these initiatives lack any shared measurement of impact and the supporting infrastructure to forge any true alignment of efforts of accountability.
Social Sector Networks	• Groups of individuals or organizations fluidly connected through purposeful relationships, whether formal or informal. • Collaboration is generally ad hoc, and most often the emphasis is placed on information sharing and targeted shot-term actions, rather than a sustained and structured initiative.
Collective Impact Initiatives	• Long-term commitment by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. • Their actions are supported by a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization.

*Summarized from: John Kania and Mark Kramer's "Collective Impact" in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*: Winter 2011.

What it takes:

The Five Conditions of Collective Success

1) *Common Agenda*—Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions. This includes common vocabulary and shared goals.

2) *Shared Measurement Systems*—Developing a shared measurement system is essential to collective impact. Agreement on a common agenda is illusory without agreement on the ways success will be measured and reported. Collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned, it also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures.

3) *Mutually Reinforcing Activities*—Collective impact initiatives depend on a diverse group of stakeholders working together, not by requiring that all participants do the same thing, but by encouraging each participant to undertake the specific set of activities at which it excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others.

4) *Continuous Communication*—Developing trust among nonprofits, corporations, and government agencies is a monumental challenge. Participants need several years of regular meetings to build up enough experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation behind their different efforts. All the collective impact initiatives studied* held monthly or even biweekly in-person meetings among the organizations' CEO-level leaders and maintained communications between meetings using web-based tools such as Google groups.

    Skipping meetings or sending lower-level delegates was not acceptable; at first, many of the leaders showed up because they hoped that their participation would bring their organizations additional funding, but they soon learned that was not the meetings' purpose. What they discovered instead were the rewards of learning and solving problems together with others who shared their same deep knowledge and passion about the issue. Most of the meetings were supported by external facilitators and followed a structured agenda.

5) *Backbone Support Organizations*—Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative. The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.

    The backbone organization requires a dedicated staff separate from the participant organizations who can plan, manage, and support the initiative through ongoing facilitation, technology and communications support, data collection and reporting, and handling the myriad logistical and administrative details needed for the initiative to function smoothly. The initial staffing of a backbone organization should include a project manager, data manager, and facilitator.

Funding and Implementation:

Creating a successful collective impact initiative requires a significant financial investment: the time participating organizations must dedicate to the work, the development and monitoring of shared measurement systems, and the staff of the backbone organization needed to lead and support the initiative's ongoing work.

To combat funder reluctance to pay for infrastructure and preference for short-term solutions, collective impact requires that they support a long-term process of social change without identifying any particular solution in advance. They must be willing to let grantees steer the work and have the patience to stay with an initiative for years, recognizing that social change can come from the gradual improvement of an entire system over time, not just from a single breakthrough by an individual organization. This requires a fundamental change in how funders see their role, from funding organizations to leading a long-term process of social change.

It is no longer enough to fund an innovative solution created by a single non-profit or to build that organization's capacity. Instead, funders must help create and sustain the collective processes, measurement reporting systems, and community leadership that enable cross-sector coalitions to arise and thrive.

Research indicates that funders who want to create large-scale change follow four practices:

1) Take responsibility for assembling the elements of a solution
2) Create a movement for change
3) Include solutions from outside the non-profit sector
4) Use actionable knowledge to influence behaviour and improve performance

Caveat

Collective impact does not solve all social problems. In fact, some problems are best solved by individual organizations. It is a matter of *technical problems* versus *adaptive problems*. Some social problems are technical in that they are well defined, the answer is known in advance, and one or a few organizations have the ability to implement the solution. Examples include funding college scholarships, building a hospital, or installing inventory controls in a food bank. Adaptive problems, by contrast, are complex, the answer is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources or authority to bring about the necessary change. Reforming public education, restoring wetland environments, and improving community health are all adaptive problems. In these cases, reaching an effective solution requires learning by the stakeholders involved in the problem, who must then change their own behaviour in order to create a solution.

Shifting from isolated impact to collective impact is not merely a matter of encouraging more collaboration or public-private partnerships. It requires a systemic approach to social impact that focuses on the relationships between organizations that have the skills and resources to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective action to succeed.