Provocation Paper – Collaboration

Introduction

Collaboration has a huge intuitive appeal for many involved in the work of community and system transformation. If we are addressing joined-up problems, don't we need joined-up solutions? If we are trying to transform a community, shouldn't the community have a role in that process? And if we are working near others with similar aims, shouldn't we also be working with them? At its best, we know that collaboration can multiply the impact of isolated efforts, connect work across sectors, unite people across social and political divides, attract publicity and funding, and unleash untapped capacity.

So why is deep, meaningful collaboration so rare? And why, when groups attempt it, does it so often break down? The quick answer is that it is difficult work. Which is not to say we shouldn't attempt it – just that we should approach it with care and humility. Because when we talk about collaboration, we're not just talking about the technical process of connecting separate projects – we're also talking about purpose, trust, and power, about the ability to manage and respond to complexity, and about the ability to continuously learn and adapt.

In this paper, we will explore evidence and insights about successful collaboration from across the network and beyond.

Story

Wesley Community Action is a collective impact initiative in the Wellington region of New Zealand, supporting communities to bring about the change they want to see. Founded in 1952, they have evolved towards a community-led approach, growing to believe that 'people are the experts in their own lives' and 'that change happens by the power of the people – not by the power of "helping" agencies like us.'

A commitment to not 'telling people what to do' has resulted in them supporting a diversity of projects on themes from early childhood to foster care, and from gang membership to tackling meth addiction.

Using a strengths-based approach they support communities to identify the assets at their disposal and the issues they most wish to address – and then they stay alongside as a genuine partner.

There is a symbiosis to their approach; gains on one programme enable greater gains to be made elsewhere. This is particularly

apparent in the Te Roopu Tiakai Rangatahi (TRTR) initiative, started in 2018 as a collaboration between four organisations. TRTR develops young people's wellbeing, resilience and leadership– which those young people then channel into other local initiatives. The initiative began in response not just to the challenges young people face, but also to the tendency to see young people as 'problems to be fixed', and to the prevalence of 'well-meaning, single-problem-focused initiatives that are dropped into the community'. In the words of one of TRTR's youth leaders: "Other services for youth are not supported
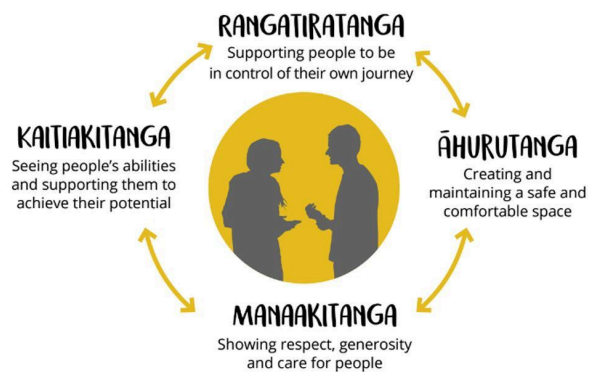
by young people. Everything we do is made by us, for us – we know how to deliver it in a way that works for us." There are good early indications of TRTR's impact.

Perspectives

How do you collaborate to transform communities and address complex, interconnected issues? Voices from diverse contexts share their views on the essential features of powerful collaborations.

Who?	When?	What?
Graeme Duncan (Right to Succeed)	08.23 - 09.49	**Taking a community-led approach to collaboration** 'It's about bringing together the whole community… to work together to define the change that's required in their community. We work to resource and support them to deliver that work.'
Miriam Siwela (Teach for Zimbabwe)	45.35 - 47.38	**Being humble** 'One of the key mindsets is humility – you need to be very humble, and also empathetic.'
Michelle Johansson (Ako Matatupu)	51.55 - 52.30	**Investing in relationships** 'Often we think of the introduction processes as the bit before the work, but actually that bit is the work.'
Michelle Johansson (Ako Matatupu)	01.16.59 - 01.18.31	**Acknowledging and addressing past harms** 'Why should indigenous parents, people, communities go into a space that has always punished them for being indigenous?'

Understanding a community's context and history

'You cannot just go in and think that you understand the complexity, without really robust historical analyses and looking at the traumas that they have experienced. It's not enough to look at your single lane of work.' Kenya Bradshaw, TNTP

'If you understand somebody's context of historical marginalisation, you start appreciating the challenges that people have gone through, and that helps us build trust, mutual respect … If you don't have respect for that culture, that community, people there, how are you going to drive change in that context?' Shisir Khanal, Teach for Nepal

Self-interrogation by funders and decision makers

'We've shifted away from this idea of: "Let's look at Maori statistics and Pacifica statistics, and let's look at how well they're doing". It's this othering – without interrogating the identities and cultures and values and beliefs that we bring… Actually how do I interrogate myself as part of the fabric of Aotearoa New Zealand?' Hinekura Lisa Smith, University of Auckland

Leadership by those with lived experience of the issues

'There's a difference between knowing something conceptually and knowing something experientially and viscerally... There is a knowing that comes from having to survive and thrive in a system that is trying to kill you, that nobody who hasn't experienced that has.' Jenni Oki, Teach for America

'As an outsider I can bring certain expertise, but ultimately the ownership of this vision has to be with the people that we are serving.' Shisir Khanal, Teach for Nepal

Pursuing equity and sharing power

'Three years ago, when we went out the community with a model and invited their feedback, we said that we wanted to protect two spaces on the steering group. Someone said: "You want this to be community led but you want to give two out of fourteen spaces on the board to community members?" We realised that we had to embrace this properly and at that moment we changed everything to 50/50: half the spots on the board for the heads of the statutory services – police, children's services etc – half for community leaders and those with lived experiences.' Mariyam Farooq, Black Thrive

'What we do a lot is create our own spaces to bring people into, instead of being part of the existing spaces in a community – for us that's a barrier that we want to think about.' Chan Soon Seng, Teach for Malaysia

'If you are not careful, you just create another structure where these people are not dominant.' Radost Boycheva, Teach for Bulgaria

Building accountability through relationships

'If you know that 20 people are going to be asking you questions the following month it creates a different kind of urgency around fixing a problem than some report out there. There is an accountability through the relationships.' Mariyam Farooq, Black Thrive

Evidence

There is a growing body of evidence around how to collaborate effectively for community and system change, and growing evidence of the impact of specific initiatives. However four important warnings emerge from the research for anyone embarking on this work.

1. Learn from the past

Success is possible but far from guaranteed. This is complex work and requires humility, a willingness to learn from the past, and a deliberate, structured approach. As the authors of 'Putting Collective Impact in Context' (Henig et al, 2015) put it:

> 'The research literature shows that cross-sector collaborations to improve urban communities and educational outcomes have historically been difficult to pull off and to sustain; they have resulted in some individual successes but few widespread improvements ... partial, fragile, weak, and ephemeral efforts are the norm'.

2. Commit to deeply understanding your context

Context has such a major effect on a project's success that 'it is notoriously difficult to draw conclusions about what works', write Kubisch et al (2010). The only viable replicable 'model' for community impact, therefore, is one that supports people to think about how to approach it in their context, not one that that tells them exactly what to do. 'What seems like a promising approach in one community might fail miserably in another due to history, capacity, political dynamics, or leadership', wrote Burns and Brown in 'Lessons from a National Scan of Comprehensive Place-Based Philanthropic Initiatives' (2012).

3. Dedicate time to building relationships

In their Historical Review of Place-Based Approaches (2017), Lankelly Chase state that '[m]uch of the literature on partnership emphasises the need to allow time for trusting relationships to develop and to build confidence, skills and capacity among all stakeholders. This is perhaps the most consistent message of all those in the literature.' This part of the process is all too often rushed, despite being make or break for the success of any initiative: 'Research has often found that timescales for building resident confidence and involving marginalised community members are too short, with the result that engagement is superficial'.

4. Share power with the local community

Kretzmann and McKnight state in 'Building Communities from the Inside Out' (1993) that 'the historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort'. This is echoed by Lankelly Chase (2017):

> 'The literature consistently argues that it is essential to value local knowledge and that there needs to be a shift of power to local residents if change is to be achieved and sustained… The literature also stresses that transferring control to 'the community' is easier said than done. In fact, over 'romanticising' community members can perhaps be as disempowering in the long term as the failure to share power – they don't have all the answers and cannot be expected to'

Further reading

Here are some of the most striking summaries of what we know about collaborative change efforts:

- Collaboration and collective impact: how can funders, NGOs and governments achieve more together? (Mulgan, NESTA, 2016)
- Historical Review of Place-Based Approaches (Lankelly Chase, 2017)
- Putting collective impact in context: A review of the literature on local cross-sector collaboration to improve education (Henig et al, Columbia University, 2015)
- Voices from the Field iii: Lessons and Challenges from Two Decades of Community Change Efforts (Kubisch et al, Aspen Institute, 2010)

Examples

Below are some examples of collaborative community change initiatives from within and beyond the Teach for All network.

- Anseye Pou Ayiti spent two years listening to community members before launching their first program, using an Asset–Based Community Development approach.

- In Colombia, Escuela Nueva use a democratic model to collaborate with families in rural communities.

- In the UK, Right to Succeed support communities in the Northwest of England to give all children the best start in life, co-designing programmes bespoke to local needs.

- In Monterrey, Enseña por México alumni have spent the past year speaking to and building relationships with parents throughout the communities in which the organization places teachers.

- In the US, Strive Together run cradle-to-career cross-sector collaborations in c.70 communities.

- In India, Educate Girls mobilise communities in rural villages to identify and re-enroll out-of-school girls.

- In Ancash, Perú, the Enseña Perú set up the 'Efecto Ancash' collective action project to transform educational outcomes in the region.

- In Israel, the Better Together Initiative run collaborative neighbourhood change projects focused on at risk children.

- In the UK, West London Zone is a place-based collective impact project, coordinating the efforts of schools and NGOs, and modelled on Harlem Children's Zone.

- Teach For Zimbabwe is mobilizing fellows in their first and second years as teachers to work closely with parents and caregivers in the rural communities of Chiredzi and Mutoko.

- In the UK, The Reach Children's Hub was launched by Reach Academy, an all-through school, after seven years building relationships with local students and parents.

- In Kenya, Shining Hope for Communities supports urban slum transformation using a community-based organising platform, a focus on women and girls' leadership, and by linking services including health care, girls' education, and clean water.

- In the US, The New Teacher Project (TNTP) has developed a sensitive approach to building a deep understanding of the contexts in which it works in partnership with community members.

Insights

This section outlines what we think we now know about collaboration as a network, outlining the most urgent and important ideas for people seeking to drive community impact and systemic change.

Where should we start when planning a new collaborative project?

The real challenge of collective action lies not in getting people to work together effectively, tough as this can be, but in responding to several different types of challenge simultaneously. Successful collaborative initiatives take a sophisticated and strategic approach to four areas:

1. Understanding Context
Gaining deep knowledge of the local context and building trust

2. Sharing power with the Community
Pursuing equity and community leadership

3. Structuring Collaboration
Enabling disparate groups to collaborate effectively

4. Responding to Complexity
Acting amidst, and learning from, complexity and change

There is a progression from left to right: you need to understand context to build trust with the community, you need to share power to set up a meaningful collaboration, and you need to have a rigorous structure in place to be able to respond to complexity. However none of these stages is ever complete: to succeed, each must be constantly maintained and refreshed.

The following sections address each of these four areas.

1. How can we understand context and build trust?

Be humble

Humility is a critical characteristic for those involved in collective impact, and particularly for those who hold power, resources and money. Humility unlocks the ability to listen, to self-interrogate, to think again, and to think differently.

Listen to the community

The stories decision makers and funders tell themselves about a place are often drawn from data and from dominant historical narratives. This can result in partial or problematic narratives, which obscure both the strengths of communities and the harm they may have experienced. There is huge value and importance in listening to communities tell their own stories, and in using storytelling itself as a tool within the work of collective impact.

Investigate the history and acknowledge past harms

Conducting a thorough analysis of a community and its context before launching an initiative will reveal a community's priorities, challenges and appetite for change. It is essential that the analysis has a

historic dimension, exposing inequities they may have experienced, along with any previous attempts to address them, and the traces, positive or negative, that those attempts left behind. 'Unresolved, unhealed trauma is a force to be reckoned with in most, if not all, of the largest systemic issues we face. And it is far more common than we acknowledge among people involved in collective impact work', write Milligan, Zerda and Kania in [The Relational Work of Systems Change](#) (2022). Although 'the painful or traumatic events may have occurred in the past, the felt trauma still exists in the present and will remain an impediment to future progress unless it is dealt with.'

Interrogate your own biases and assumptions

'People who work with collective impact efforts are all actors in the systems they are trying to change, and that change must begin from within', write [Milligan, Zerda and Kania](#) (2022). As well as investigating the local context and its history, we need to turn the lens on ourselves and interrogate our own assumptions, prejudices or fixed mindsets – and then to support others joining the collaboration to do the same. This enables you to see the true, deeper, roots of an issue, relinquish the sense that you know best, and to recognise that your own actions might be part of the problem.

Apply a Systems Thinking lens

Systems thinking is necessary when launching a project in a new context. Places and their problems do not exist in a vacuum. Without a perspective on how a place fits within its broader locality and how one issue dovetails with many others, there is the potential for well-intended actions to have unintended negative consequences.

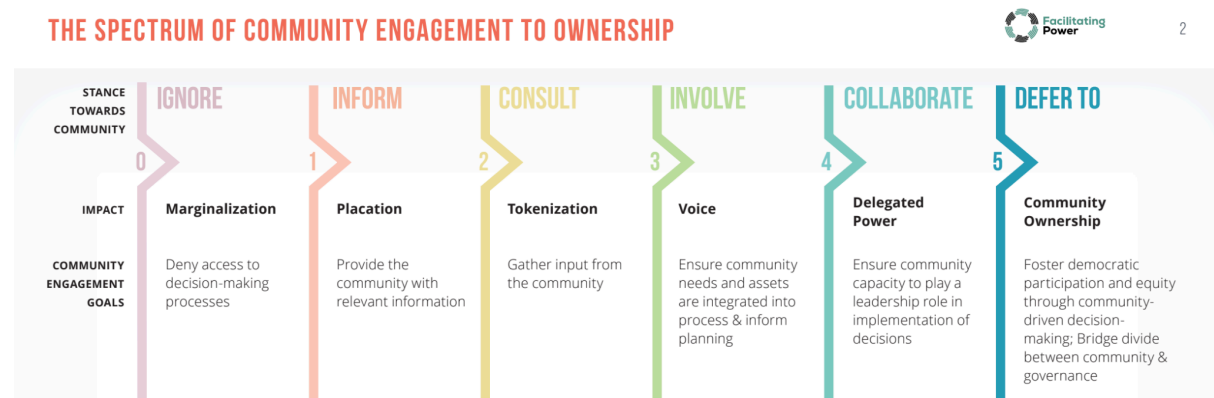*Conduct an asset mapping activity*

Centrally designed solutions are frequently imposed on complex, local situations, disregarding existing efforts that may be struggling for funding and resources. Frequently these pre-designed solutions not only disregard context but address the wrong issues. '[W]herever there are effective community development efforts, those efforts are based upon an understanding, or map, of the community's assets, capacities and abilities', wrote [Kretzmann and McKnight](#) (1993), the creators of [Asset-Based Community Development](#) (ABCD). ABCD aims to treat communities as producers not consumers, citizens not clients, by acknowledging and tapping their existing strengths. Beginning with a focus on strengths not deficits not only uncovers untapped resources, it sends the message that a community is respected and that it already possesses at least part of the solution to its challenges.

2. How can we pursue equity and share power with the community?

Be transparent about what you mean by collaboration

We need to interrogate the idea of 'collaboration' when we work with communities. What passes as collaboration is sometimes skin-deep consultation or research, rather than a genuinely shared endeavour. Use a tool like this [Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#) (2019) to identify what you truly intend and be prepared to share this transparently. 'With the exception of marginalization (a zero on the spectrum), each of the steps along the spectrum are essential for building

capacity for community collaboration and governance', writes Rosa Gonzalez, who created this iteration of the tool.

THE SPECTRUM OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TO OWNERSHIP

	IGNORE 0	INFORM 1	CONSULT 2	INVOLVE 3	COLLABORATE 4	DEFER TO 5
STANCE TOWARDS COMMUNITY						
IMPACT	Marginalization	Placation	Tokenization	Voice	Delegated Power	Community Ownership
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GOALS	Deny access to decision-making processes	Provide the community with relevant information	Gather input from the community	Ensure community needs and assets are integrated into process & inform planning	Ensure community capacity to play a leadership role in implementation of decisions	Foster democratic participation and equity through community-driven decision-making; Bridge divide between community & governance

Be prepared to invest time

Authentic community partnership increases the likelihood of meaningful long term change – but it requires more investment than people often imagine. According to Kenya Bradshaw of TNTP, community engagement is sometimes overlooked 'because it takes time' and because 'whether it be through policy and practice… we could get a whole lot done without it'.

Maintain a deliberate focus on equity

Equity is a notion many groups aspire for in principle, but which is often under-thought and under-resourced in practice. Equity is not just an attitude; it has practical implications and should generate tangible outcomes. It involves a loss of control for those accustomed to having control and it means building a community's capacity to make decisions and lead change. Review this Community Engagement Checklist (Omar and Helfer, 2018) to reflect on your norms of interaction with community members, and listen to this powerful talk by Vu Le: 'Beyond Seats at the Table: Equity, Inclusion, and Collective Impact' (Collective Impact Forum, 2018).

Overcome your own reluctance to relinquish control

Approaching a community with good intentions and what feel like good ideas, it can be very difficult to relinquish control: to introduce time and complexity into what might have been a quick, tidy process. In a 2015 review of Collective Community Initiatives (CCIs), Henig et al found 'that in spite of their defining emphasis on grassroots engagement, most CCIs were still to a great extent trying to effect community change through outside, top-down intervention.'

3. How can we best structure collaboration?

Use a framework

Effective collaboration can be transformative, but it's not the way the majority of organisations and institutions are used to working. It requires different procedures, different mindsets and a different kind of leadership. The most influential tool for structuring collaboration today is Kania and Kramer's Collective Impact framework (2011). It has five steps:

1. **Common Agenda:** Agreement on a shared vision and joint approach.
2. **Shared Measurement:** Establishment of ways success will be measured and reported.

3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Engagement of a diverse set of stakeholders, typically across sectors, and coordination of action.
4. **Continuous Communication:** Frequent and structured communication.
5. **Backbone Support:** Ongoing support by independent, funded staff dedicated to the initiative.

Although much of the approach may sound like common sense, a few features differentiate it from looser forms of collaboration:

- Each of these steps is a structured process (see the resources on the Collective Impact Forum)
- Kania & Kramer frankly acknowledge the time and resources required to coordinate this kind of work, specifying the need for an independent 'backbone' organisation or, if that's not possible, at least some dedicated resource in one or more participating organisations.
- There is a focus on rigorous data collection using shared measures to evaluate and improve the process.

Collective Impact, write Hanleybrown, Kania and Kramer (2012), is 'not just a fancy name for collaboration, but represents a fundamentally different, more disciplined, and higher performing approach to achieving large-scale social impact'.

Dedicate significant time to building authentic relationships

As the importance of relationships and true community partnership has become clearer, Kania and Kramer's Collective Impact model has become more relational and equity-focused – as Milligan, Zerda and Kania outline in 'The Relational Work of Systems Change' (2022). Relationship building needs to be approached as strategically and deliberately as the rest of the process, if not more so. The Lankelly Chase report (2017) confirms this: 'the literature generally suggests that too much time and attention can be given to getting formal structures right and too little to informal ways of working together – yet it is the latter that form the glue and create the trust that make the former work'.

4. How can we respond to complexity?

Evaluate and learn throughout

Evaluation provides feedback on whether an approach is working and the ways in which it might need to adapt. To increase motivation for evaluation, Weaver & Cabaj (2016) suggest framing 'shared measurement' as 'strategic learning'. And Kubisch et al (2010) stress the value of designing the evaluation process with the widest possible range of people – both to improve the quality of data and to increase buy-in for the process:

> '[including the] opinions and priorities of multiple and diverse stakeholders in developing key evaluation questions cultivates ownership of the learning process and increases the likelihood that results will be useful, relevant, and credible for potential users'

Evaluating the impact of collective initiatives, and telling apart the contributions of different actors, can be challenging. See FSG's Evaluating complexity toolkit and Cabaj's paper on Shared Measurement for Tamarack Institute (2017).

Iterate to solve problems

'[W]hen we are honest about it,' write Pritchett et al (2017), 'we have to admit that we often do not know what to do when faced with complex challenges in complex contexts.' The answers, they continue, 'do exist and can be found, but must emerge through active iteration, experimentation, and learning'

within a particular context. One tool to support this process is Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), developed by Pritchett et al at Harvard. See the PDIA toolkit for details.

The premise of PDIA is that instead of dropping 'best practice' solutions onto situations, problems should be 'locally nominated and prioritized' and responses trialled 'iteratively to identify customized "best fit" responses'. This process not only enables the most appropriate solutions for local problems to be found, it also enables the unintended consequences of attempted solutions to emerge and be addressed early.

Questions / What's next?

The evidence around collaboration for community and system change is growing fast. Gaps of particular relevance to the Teach for All network include:

- Documenting learning and best practice from diverse international contexts (many of the best-known examples come from the US and the UK).
- Investigating how isolated projects community change projects connect to create wider system change.

Useful Links

- *Community Impact Conversation: full call recording* (Passcode: y#nGh0Cs)
- *Regional research documents*
- *Global learning series website*
- *Case studies of community impact FY21*
- *MLR Original Research?*
- *The Collective Impact Forum resource bank*
- *The Collective Change Lab's publication library*
- *The Asset-Based Community Development Toolkit*