



How Do You Build the “Right” Cross-Sector Partnership to Implement Collective Impact Approaches?

By Alison Gold, Living Cities

Introduction

America’s cities are engines for national prosperity and individual economic opportunity for all people. However, the systems designed to support these results were built in a different era, on now outdated assumptions, and have not adapted to the changing social, technological, economic, and political forces of the world today. In attempting to address some of resulting inequalities and disparities that certain segments of the population face, institutions and individuals have long focused on technical solutions like job training programs, and fixing up buildings. However, these approaches do not prevent inequality; they only treat its symptoms.

Living Cities, a philanthropic collaborative made up of 22 of the world’s largest foundations and financial institutions working together to improve the lives of low-income people and the cities in which they live, believes that there is better way. We believe that in order to achieve different results, we need to transform systems that currently produce opportunity for some into systems that produce opportunity for all.

How do you change a system? We don’t yet know! But one hypothesis that we’re testing through our grants, investments, research, and networks is that a cross-sector partnership working collectively to address a complex

social problem can change a system. We think that the innovative aspect of the collective impact approach – which emphasizes principles such as alignment of disparate actors toward a common agenda, shared measurement, and carefully structured leadership and communication strategies – is in who is applying it (a cross-sector partnership) and what it is being applied to (complex social problem).

In articulating and testing this hypothesis, we have realized that there is a big assumption among funders, ourselves included, that local leaders know how to build high-impact cross-sector partnerships and do the hard work of collaboration and continuous improvement. In our own funding portfolio, however, which includes cross-sector initiatives like the five-city Integration Initiative and the StriveTogether national network, we have seen how smart and committed leaders struggle to build partnerships even where there is trust, resilience, and an ongoing commitment to problem-solving.

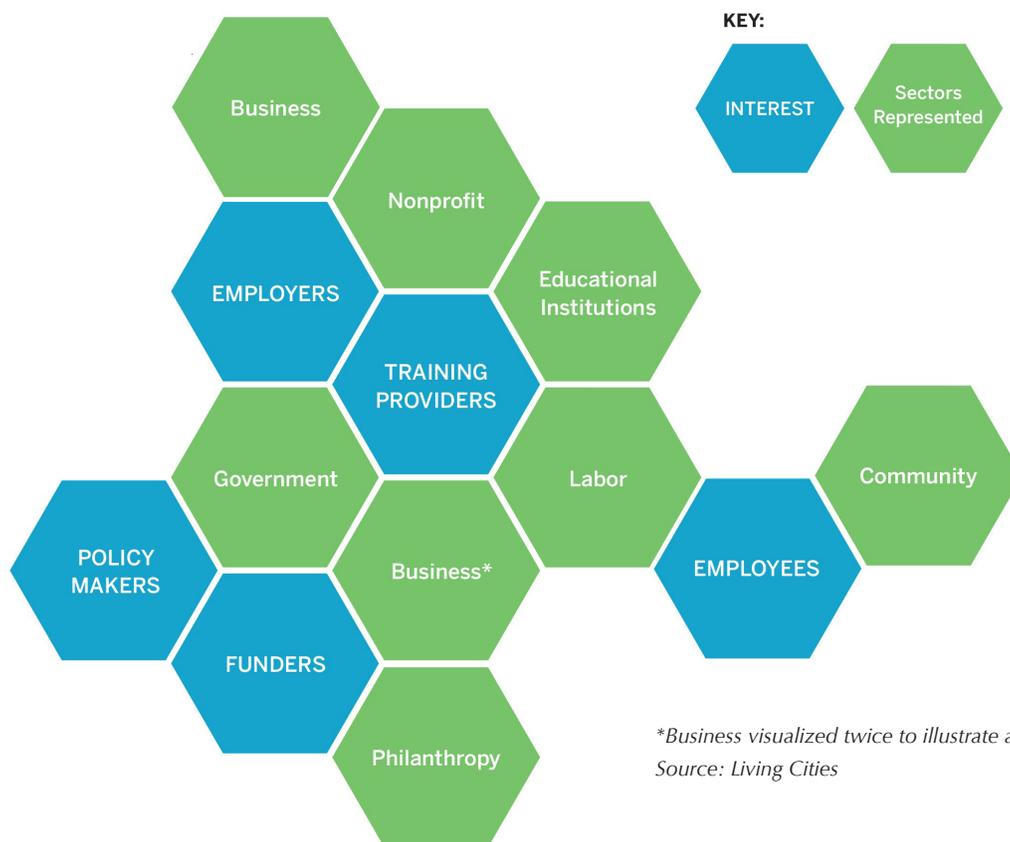
We cannot provide readers with a recipe that will yield the ideal cross-sector partnership because the “right” partnership depends on the context and intended result. Yet based on what we are seeing with our own grantees and

partners, we believe it is valuable to have a greater understanding of cross-sector partnerships so that practitioners, participants, and funders have a systematic method and shared language to reflect on whether their partnerships are structured to achieve their intended goals. This led us to ask the question, what does it take to build the “right” cross-sector partnership to implement the principles of collective impact?

Building a Better Cross-Sector Partnership

The term cross-sector partnership is often used to describe an array of activities involving representatives from multiple sectors. Such efforts range from events and one-time projects, to government-appointed commissions and ongoing programs, as well as alliances of stakeholders working in new ways to address complex social and economic challenges. These diverse activities have all been labeled with the term “cross-sector partnership” not because they share strategies or goals, but rather because of who is involved with them: representatives from two or more sectors including business, government, nonprofits, philanthropy, labor, and/or communities.

Figure 1: Interest-Based Frame of a Cross-Sector Partnership with a Goal of 99% Labor Force Employment



In doing this work, we had the epiphany that this view of cross-sector partnerships is problematic because it does not recognize the variability contained within each sector. For instance, lumping all types of business together assumes homogeneity between the interests of organizations that range from small local businesses to large international corporations. This simply is not true.

We've identified a different way to think about the membership of cross-sector partnerships, which we call the interest-based frame. Instead of thinking about these efforts as alliances of organizations that require representation from different sectors, they should be thought of as alliances of organizations that together have a role in solving a problem and achieving a shared goal.

What would an example of the interest-based approach to cross-sector partnerships look like? In the example shown in figure 1, the cross-sector partnership is made up of members working toward the goal that 90 percent of their region's labor force will be gainfully employed in 10 years.

The interest-based frame highlights the reality that virtually all sectors have multiple interests when it comes to solving complex social and economic challenges. It reveals that depending on its goals, a partnership may require multiple representatives from any one sector who are involved with and can speak to different parts of the work—for example policymaking, practices, or funding. In addition, this approach helps partnership members understand their roles and bring their expertise to the table, while preventing individuals from feeling like they have to represent the viewpoint of an entire sector.

Over the last two and a half years Living Cities has been learning with and from a small group of high-performing cross-sector partnerships. Based on their experiences and input, as well as that of more than 30 other funders and practitioners, Living Cities developed *What Barriers? Insights from Solving Problems through Cross-Sector Partnerships*, a publication offering a strategic framework for cross-sector partnerships including discussion of the traits that make up a strong foundation, factors that influence success, and behaviors of high-impact efforts.¹ In that spirit, here are seven things that we are learning about building the “right” cross-sector partnerships to implement the principles of collective impact.

1. Name a Specific and Measurable Result

Cross-sector partnerships working on a shared agenda are most effective when they can articulate a specific result, which states a clear outcome or set of outcomes to be achieved. This type of result communicates what success will look like for the partnership and can serve as a foundation for organizing data collection, measuring progress and ensuring accountability.

For example, the Baltimore Integration Partnership (BIP) has named the specific result of reconnecting low-income Baltimore City residents in three targeted predominantly African-American neighborhoods to the regional economy. The BIP used data to identify its target population and as a foundation for measuring progress toward their specified result.

2. Change the System

For decades, social change efforts have focused their level of intervention on program and project delivery. While these approaches have had significant impacts on individuals and communities, they have not been sufficient to solve our most intractable problems, such as poverty. A cross-sector partnership implementing the principles of collective impact is by definition focused on changing a system, as its aim is to intervene and reorient the set of behaviors, interactions, projects and programs in an existing system (or systems) in order to produce a different, enduring, and large-scale result.

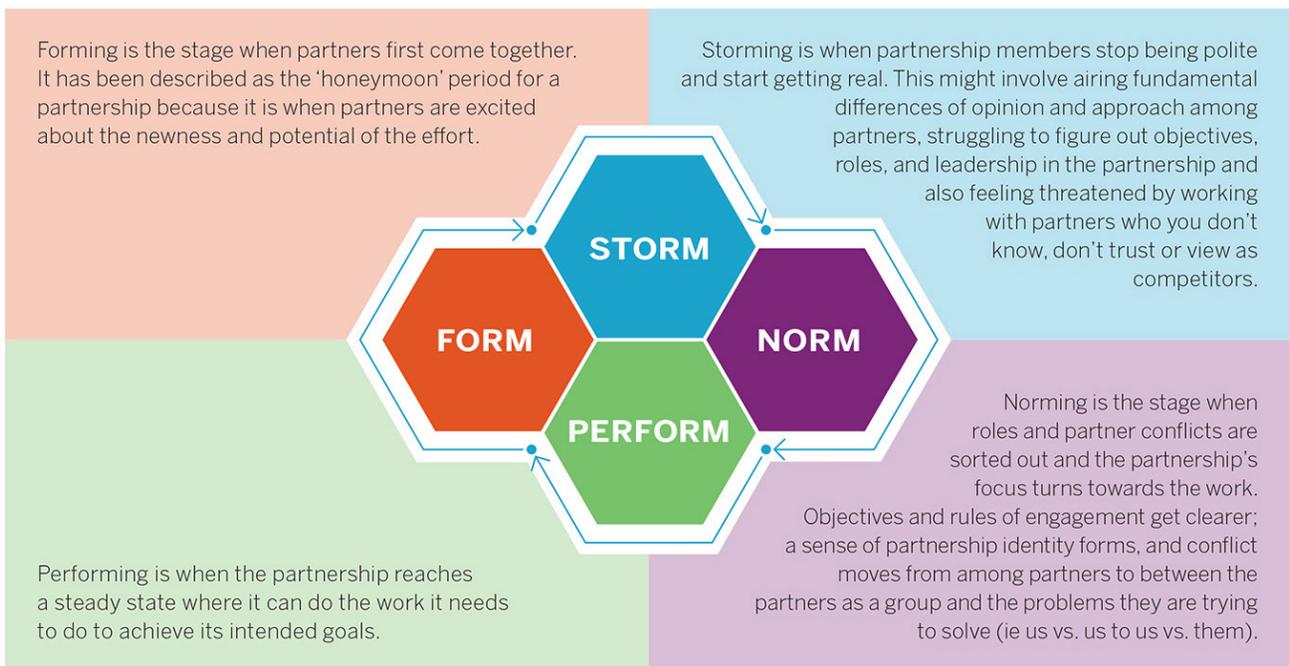
For instance, the Newark Integration Initiative (NII) uses collective impact strategies to address the unhealthy living conditions that affect how Newark's low-income children learn. Its cross-sector partnership works to coordinate policy, data and investments to create healthy housing and food options as well as access to health care, ultimately to improve student educational achievement. When asked what advice she would give to other cross-sector partnerships based on her experience, NII project director Monique Baptiste-Good responded, “it is important that the table establishes a shared purpose, not just serve as a space to validate any one singular institutional agenda. For collective impact to be effective, no one organization or institution owns the work. The purpose of the partnership table should also be to challenge norms and come to new understandings.”

The partners in NII have been able to reach consensus on the results they are trying to produce and agree that systems change is required to produce those results. However, they have struggled to make further progress on other elements important to successful systems change. Despite months of meetings, partners have not been able to come to an agreement on shared measurable indicators of progress or an accountability structure that gives grassroots organizations equal leverage as larger public institutions such as public schools, highlighting the difficulty in moving from theory to action.

3. Engage the “Right” Representatives

The ability of a collective impact effort to make progress toward its result is interconnected with the stature and power of individuals within their own organizations and communities who are serving as representatives to the

Figure 2: Trust Building & Maintenance Cycle



Source: *Living Cities*

cross-sector partnership. We've identified three different types of representatives: designees, individuals who represent the organization or community, but do not have decision-making or implementation powers within their organization or community; doers, individuals who are responsible for implementing changes to behaviors and strategies in their organization or community, but lack the formal authority to mandate them; and decision-makers, individuals who have the authority or influence in their organization or community to require that it change its behaviors and strategies. We're learning that it's important for collective impact efforts to engage all three types of representatives.

For instance, in the Minneapolis / St. Paul metro, the Corridors of Opportunity (COO) is an initiative that takes a collective impact approach toward supporting economic growth for the region as a whole, while unlocking opportunities for those with the greatest need. COO has representatives ranging from the mayors and deputy mayors of Minneapolis and St. Paul and County and State Commissioners (decision-makers), to staff members from the organizations involved with the work (doers) and community members (designees).

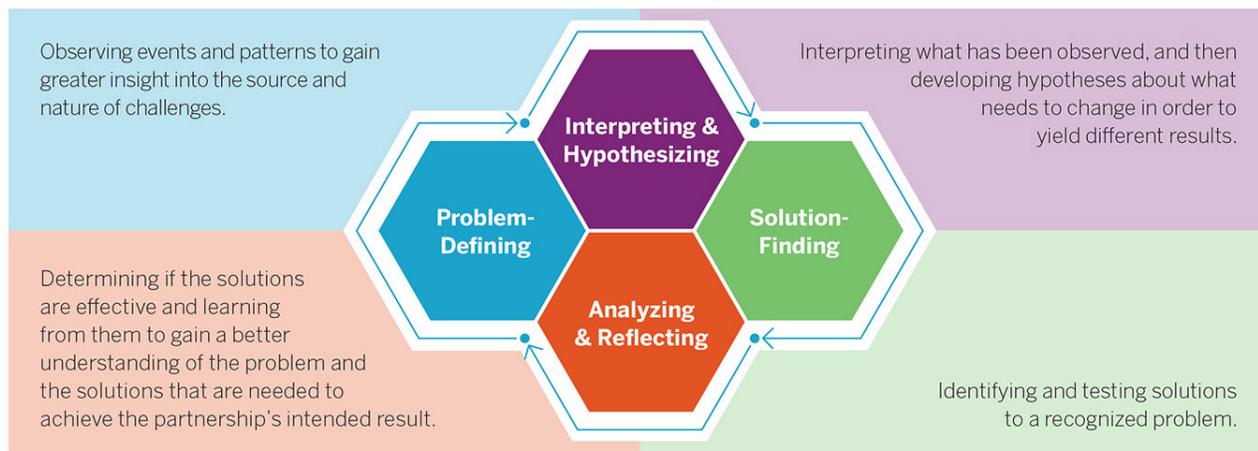
4. Build the "Right" Structure

In order to implement the principles of collective impact, there's no doubt that it is important to engage all types of representatives. It is also necessary to recognize

the differences in power, authority, and knowledge that that different types of representatives bring to the process. This requires the partnership's structure to create differentiated ways for the representatives to participate. We've observed that collective impact efforts seem to be showing greater progress when they build formal structures that outline specific roles for each partner and clarify the ways that each partner is accountable to one another. Formal structures are codified through tools like operating documents, memoranda of understanding, contracts, or other documentation.

Since a cross-sector partnership's representatives and structure are so interrelated, we'll also ground this idea in the example of the Corridors of Opportunity initiative. In order to engage representatives with as wide a range of power, authority, knowledge, and perspectives as elected officials and community members have, the COO has developed a formal structure with many components. It includes a policy board made up of decision-makers and a senior staff group composed of doers who work for the members of the policy board. Specialized workgroups implement key parts of the initiative; for instance, local government staff and lenders lead efforts to fund transit-oriented development. A community engagement team includes a network of community-based organizations that engage diverse and underrepresented populations, and incorporates their ideas in the planning process through channels set up to ensure their perspectives reach the doers and decision-makers.

Figure 3: Problem-Solving Cycle



Source: *Living Cities*

5. Embrace a “Thinking and Doing” Charge

In the cross-sector partnerships that Living Cities has funded and assessed in this research, the initiatives that are beginning to demonstrate impact in changing systems are those that view their charge as thinking-and-doing. Partnerships with a thinking-and-doing charge recognize that there is no set formula for changing a complex system to produce a different result, because even if it has been done elsewhere, systems are context-dependent. Recognizing this reality enables partners to embrace their charge to develop a course of action through learning and experimentation.

The Detroit Corridor Initiative (DCI – formerly the Woodward Corridor Initiative), is facing a unique challenge in trying to redensify the urban core of a city that has lost nearly 60% of its population. There is no model or best practice to look to, but a thinking-and-doing approach allows them to experiment with multiple courses of action. The DCI has worked to streamline business licensing in city government and build and redevelop commercial and residential properties. It has created an incentive program to attract residents to buy and rent in targeted neighborhoods and launched an innovative investment vehicle that ensures redevelopment projects are possible despite weak market constraints. The DCI is using this range of projects and programs to identify the necessary levers to change systems in Detroit that have long thwarted reform and have created concentrated poverty in pockets throughout the city.

6. Trust is Imperative

Trust is an important and underestimated ingredient to making a cross-sector partnership work. If members of a cross-sector partnership do not believe in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of their partners as well as the

partnership itself, it is very difficult to achieve the partnership's intended goals.

Through our investments and research we're learning that Tuckman's Group Development Model² — outlined in Figure 2—is extremely applicable to cross-sector partnerships because it articulates the stages that a partnership and its representatives need to go through in order to build and maintain trust, a necessary ingredient for being able to collaborate and implement the principles of collective impact.

In our research and grantee portfolio, we've observed that there's a common trap that partnerships fall into relating to trust: they try to go straight from forming to performing. This research has also revealed that undertaking the storming and norming processes actually leads to performing sooner and more effectively than if you skip from forming to performing – a phenomenon we call the form-perform paradox. If you skip the storming and norming, the phases that establish trust and boundaries and clarity and consensus, it's very difficult to perform successfully. Addressing conflict and building trust—while difficult—are necessary prerequisites to being able to implement the work.

7. Always be Problem-solving

Similar to building and maintaining trust, problem-solving is a necessary behavior that cross-sector partnerships must practice to advance their work. Based on our observations, we believe that partnerships implementing the principles of collective impact need to engage strongly with all the stages of problem-solving as described in Figure 3: problem-defining, interpreting & hypothesizing, solution-finding, and analyzing & reflecting.

In reality, though, we've observed that almost all partnerships are strong in some stages of the cycle and weaker

in others. The tough work that the partnership has to do is to build its muscles and practices so that it is able to exhibit all the problem-solving cycle behaviors strongly.

One pattern we've observed in all types of cross-sector partnerships is weak "analyzing & reflecting" behaviors. It seems that relatively few partnerships have applied their time and intellectual rigor to determining if solutions are effective and, if so, how they can be improved and how that insight feeds back into their understanding of the problem they are trying to address. This behavior is imperative for the work of cross-sector partnerships implementing the principles of collective impact, because analyzing and reflecting are the foundation for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

At Living Cities, our hope is that our work on cross-sector partnerships is just the beginning of the conversation, and that more learning that needs to take place to advance collective approaches for addressing some of the toughest challenges low-income people in America face today. We also recognize that many of these ideas are not new, and a significant number of partnerships have utilized some or all of these traits in structuring their own efforts.

“Addressing conflict and building trust are necessary prerequisites to being able to implement the work”

Overall, we aim to spur greater openness and learning about what has worked with cross-sector partnerships and, of equal importance, what has not. Part of this involves “turning up the heat” and challenging participants and funders engaged in this work to think deeply about when it is effective to work collectively, and when it might make sense to use limited resources for other kinds of approaches for the challenges at hand. We believe that learning and problem-solving are open processes, and that by approaching them this way, the social change field can achieve better results more quickly. Through continued experimentation and collaboration, we hope to evolve and refine these ideas, and identify and develop resources needed by all of us working to achieve measurable impact in the communities we serve. **CI**