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## COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Lee Rose

### SUMMARY

SHARED MEASUREMENT IS A CRITICAL, AND SOME THINK CHALLENGING, component of Collective Impact and in this article Lee Rose argues that we already have significant community knowledge, but that the power of community data to support and drive change lies in how we need to look differently at how we use and share these resources.

LEE ROSE is Director, Community Knowledge at Community Foundations of Canada and the Sherpa for the Community Knowledge Exchange (CKX), a new iterative and open-source initiative for sharing and building community knowledge co-founded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and Community Foundations of Canada. Email: [sherpa@ckx.org](mailto:sherpa@ckx.org) .

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“BUT I NEED THAT PIECE OF LEGO!”

One Sunday morning, my boys, aged 6 and 10, were sitting at opposite ends of the kitchen table, each with a pile of LEGO in front of them. Both were completely immersed in their individual projects. As their respective piles dwindled, and with creations half-constructed, they began to eye the bits and bricks across the table from them. One-off “this one for that one” exchanges ensued; however, trading quickly became hostile with both boys arguing that the other had “the piece” that he needed. In a pre-caffeinated father-of-the-year-worthy moment, I sat down at the table between them and brought both piles of LEGO together. As neither of them really had enough to build something on their own, why didn’t they build something really cool together?

Life lessons from dad aside, there are some parallels between my children co-creating something from the building blocks scattered on the kitchen table and the idea of working together to achieve Collective Impact. The beauty of LEGO lies in it being a dynamic and complex system that is governed by a certain set of rules or assumptions – much like our communities. The bits and bricks in the system are different: some are fat and square; some are long and thin. Some are highly specialized; others are fit-anywhere generalists. While there are nearly endless ways that the bits and bricks can be configured, LEGO also has a pair of system-defining constraints: the nubs and hollows that are built into each individual bit or brick. While you can fit any two parts together, the way they come together is always the same – with a satisfying click.

In the arena of Collective Impact, the bits and bricks that make up the system are things like time, talent, data, resources, money, skills, energy, and space. As we come together to tackle a particular issue – say youth homelessness or environmental sustainability – each of us brings a certain number of pieces to the table. We don’t all have the same types or number of pieces, *but we can all contribute something*. The goal is not to create a new system, but rather to find novel ways of working within the existing system to achieve a

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desired social change, with the realization and understanding that our good ideas will be inevitably constrained by the parts and skills that surround them (Johnson, 2010).

Another way to view it is to consider all of these bits and bricks as various forms of *community knowledge* – information, facts, and data that are (or could be) shared by you and others. This could include things as basic as your city’s transit schedule, the demographic makeup of your neighbourhood, or the number and types of books that are checked out of the local library every year. Other examples could be outcome measures from an after-school program, a municipal database of trees on public property, or the results of a citizen-led neighbourhood revitalization project. On their own and in isolation, these various bits of data and information may seem altogether pedestrian and uninteresting – perhaps that’s why so many reports to funders sit collecting dust on shelves or taking up space on servers. But community knowledge also includes “how” and “know-how” – your ability, capacity, and understanding to turn knowledge into action. In other words, what you know is only half of it. It’s what you do with that knowledge that really counts.

So how do we get from a seemingly random assortment of building blocks sitting in haphazard piles to a shared vision for Collective Impact? One of the ways that we strive to put the pieces together is through the creation and adoption of community indicator systems – examples of which include the *Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW)*, *Peg* (an aptly named joint initiative of United Way Winnipeg and the International Institute for Sustainable Development), and Community Foundations of Canada’s *Vital Signs*. Each of these identifies and tracks indicators that speak to a community’s – or a country’s – wellbeing. In simplest terms, *community indicators* can be described as measures that provide information about past and current trends within a community. They can present information on the overall health of a community, providing insights on things that are working well and things that might be particularly challenging, such as limited access to transit or an increase in the high school dropout rate.

At the core of community indicator systems lie various forms of data. While there’s lots of buzz and hype around data – open data, big data, raw data, meta data – we need to remember that data is just data. In fact, I’d argue that data is actually useless until you put it into context. Community indicator systems collect, analyze, and interpret data for a range of indicators and then share that information and knowledge with the broader community. In other words: they give the data context. And context is key.

When you put data into context – by mapping educational attainment by neighbourhood across a city, for example – information and insights emerge. You might start to recognize patterns and see trends. Why does a particular neighbourhood seem to have an elevated high school drop out rate? What’s the demographic make-up of that neighbourhood? What after-school programs are available? What other factors might be at play? As you continue to interpret and gather additional information, you’re actively building knowledge around the issue. And armed with that knowledge, you can begin to take action.

The other point about community knowledge is that, by and large, it is already there. I believe that we have lots of data; in fact, we’re swimming in it. The power lies in

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finding it, organizing it, understanding it in context, and packaging it to give it visibility and meaning.

## CHECKING YOUR COMMUNITY'S VITAL SIGNS

*Vital Signs* is an annual community check-up, conducted by community foundations across Canada – and now around the world – that activates community knowledge to measure the vitality of our communities.

It all started in Toronto in the late 1990s when a small group of civic leaders began discussing a new way to engage Torontonians in monitoring the wellbeing of their newly amalgamated city. After a series of meetings and public consultations, the decision was made to develop a report card for the city. The consultations that followed were lengthy and arduous, partially because they involved so many diverse perspectives from community, academia, business, media, and philanthropy. In 2001, the Toronto Community Foundation finally published the first *Toronto's Vital Signs*. It was something of a tome, but an idea was born and, over the next four years, community foundations across Canada began to take notice.

In 2005, *Vital Signs* became a national initiative of Canada's community foundations, and community after community began to experience the impact of collecting community knowledge with a range of partners around the table and then sharing that knowledge with the community at large. Now, almost 10 years after the national expansion of *Vital Signs*, more than 40 community foundations in Canada participate in the program and a transformation has taken place in many of those communities. The Calgary Foundation was asked to lead the community-based rebuilding efforts after last spring's devastating floods, the Vancouver Foundation has published ground-breaking research about connection and belonging in its multicultural city, and the Toronto Community Foundation is standing up and raising critical questions about the city's future direction at a time when the eyes of the world are on it – for better or worse.

The impact of collecting, sharing, and acting on community knowledge is not limited to community foundations in Canada's large urban centres. Thanks to *Vital Signs*, the Community Foundation of Northwestern Alberta is a partner in a new program designed to reduce skyrocketing obesity rates. Rural communities in Nova Scotia are uncovering hidden poverty in affluent university towns.

Today, *Vital Signs* has become much more than a national data collection program or a series of reports. It provides strategic direction that guides many community foundations and helps them determine everything from their local priorities for action to their grantmaking and donor engagement strategies. The reports are used by local governments, social planning councils, businesses, and countless community organizations. *Vital Signs* doesn't *talk* about the power of community philanthropy – it *illustrates* and *informs* it. It focuses on building an asset that truly is about “more than money” – *community knowledge*. But building this knowledge is actually only the beginning of the process.

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When Vital Signs first became a national program, the participating community foundations focused on the details of collecting data and creating reports – the “how” and the “what” and the “when.” But those initial forays quickly expanded into a much larger conversation about mobilizing that community knowledge, and to what end. Why is knowledge important to our communities? What role does it play? How can it enrich our lives and our vision of the future? Those are the questions that Canadian community foundations are tackling now as we consider what’s next for Vital Signs. How do we build on the national platform we’ve created? What can we learn from other communities and other countries who’ve adopted – and adapted – the program to meet their own needs?

## PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The question of shared measurement often comes up when we talk about the future of Vital Signs and how it aligns with other community indicator systems. Which indicators are the best to peg our performance against? Is there a “right way” to measure community vitality and impact?

While I think that we can all agree that the short answer is no, we must confront the inherent challenge that lies in comparing indicators across various systems. How can we have indicators of community vitality that are relevant to a particular context, while ensuring that they’re consistent and comparable at a higher order? In a conversation I had with Daniel Hoornweg of the Global Cities Indicators Facility, he described his work in researching the commonalities of three municipal-level indicator systems in Canada (specifically in Montréal, Calgary, and Vancouver) as being as perilous as trying to find a needle in a haystack. In this particular case, these three cities were measuring and tracking performance on more than 1,200 community indicators. Of these, only two of them were comparable. Perilous indeed. To put it simply: These LEGO pieces don’t fit together.

So how do we make the pieces fit? Here are three things we can start doing right now:

### **Share what you’ve got. Even if you think it isn’t much.**

Data. Time. Numbers. Clout. Whatever you’ve got – it’s time to stop hoarding it, because if you keep going it alone, it’s not going to amount to much for very long. And guess what: You don’t have all the answers. *Nobody does.* There’s so much potential for greater impact if we ascribe to a share-by-default philosophy when it comes to community knowledge. To that end, community foundations are exploring how we can make the data collected and presented through Vital Signs even more accessible for others to use and contribute to. What bits and bricks are you holding back?

### **Stop waiting for perfection.**

Vital Signs is not perfect, and I will be bold and presume that other community indicator systems aren’t either. However, the lofty goal of perfection is something that we continue to strive for, and often at the expense of something that is good enough. We get caught up in tinkering and fine-tuning, holding more meetings, and trying to build consensus, instead of getting out there and figuring things out as we go along. We could all benefit from adopting a few principles of agile management theory, which espouses the belief that once you have an understanding of a project’s overall objectives and goals, that you

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can get a move on without getting caught up in planning, securing, and accounting for every resource that a project will require before you start. In short: it's time to toss out the Gantt chart, because when it comes to community knowledge, it is possible to both build the plane and fly it at the same time. Tom Peters called this "a bias for action"; Nike says, "Just do it!"; I say, "Wheels up, let's go!"

#### **Have the courage to follow someone else's lead.**

We are all guilty of wanting to own things and to take credit. It is in our nature to want to demonstrate how *our* approach is *the right* approach; however, this organizational hubris often clouds our ability to see the bigger picture. Is it worth the time, effort, and energy to come up with new solutions, methodologies, and frameworks for every project, when others have already done much of this work? I implore you to seriously question the value of starting from scratch. Why? Because, in many cases, we are already using the same alphabet. Wouldn't it be great if we were also speaking the same language?

### **FROM COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE TO COLLECTIVE IMPACT**

Experts suggest that three pre-conditions must be in place before launching a Collective Impact initiative: an influential champion, adequate financial resources, and a sense of urgency for change. Together, these preconditions "create the opportunity and motivation necessary to bring people who have never before worked together into a Collective Impact initiative and hold them in place until the initiative's own momentum takes over" (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, n.p.).

So what role can community knowledge play in initiating a Collective Impact approach to create lasting social change? Community knowledge and programs like Vital Signs and the Canadian Index of Wellbeing are well positioned, and in fact, are already helping to create a sense of urgency for change around a variety of issues. The release of Vital Signs reports every October provides a catalytic opportunity to focus attention, rally resources, and drive a range of actors to address issues in communities across the country. In many towns and cities, community foundations and other umbrella organizations play a pivotal role beyond funding good works – they are brokers of community knowledge, they create a community table to discuss issues, and they are ready champions for Collective Impact.

When you then consider the five conditions that make up the Collective Impact framework, it's obvious that community knowledge is at work throughout. Let's see how.

***A 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.***

Community indicator programs like Vital Signs are well positioned to be the starting point for creating a common agenda to address complex social challenges. The research, data interpretation, and analysis that go into each community foundation's Vital Signs report brings each community's challenges, successes, and opportunities to light, contributing to a common understanding of issues and generating the sense of urgency needed to initiate and drive a process of change. The reports are often cited as a means of

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rallying a range of actors from different sectors in a community around a specific issue and agree on a strategy or plan to work together.

***Shared measurement: Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.***

Some may perceive shared measurement as Collective Impact's elusive holy grail; however, creating shared measurement systems isn't altogether impossible. As outlined by John Kania and Mark Kramer, the underlying premise is that we should focus on "collecting data and measuring results consistently on a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations [to ensure] that all efforts remain aligned," which will then ensure that participants are able to "hold each other accountable and learn from each other's successes and failures" (Kania & Kramer, 2013). The challenge here is on agreeing which indicators to adopt, how to generate and monitor this data in a timely way, and, perhaps more importantly, understanding how each partner's actions and interventions will impact those indicators.

So how can community knowledge support shared measurement? As suggested earlier, we don't necessarily need *more data*; we just need to understand *how to use it*. Community knowledge can form the basis of a shared measurement system to support a Collective Impact initiative by selecting a smaller number of specific indicators that will be used to track and measure impact on the target issue. The value of building the shared measurement system using community knowledge is two-fold: The data in most cases already exists and so the cost and effort of utilizing it is less, and the data already has context. Lots of context. And, therefore, lots of meaning because it is well connected with the community's overall indexes of wellbeing and other provincial, national, and international points of reference. And this context and meaning is important, because to make Collective Impact successful, you have to know not only which indicators improved, but also which factors, actions, or strategies most influenced the change. An example of using a community-wide indicator system to support a collective impact approach is Peel Counts, a joint project of United Way, the Region of Peel, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, which creates region-wide data as the basis for designing and promoting resilience-based strategies to improve outcomes across a variety of social, economic, and health indicators. Peel Counts also supports a results-based accountability model used by United Way and the region to help evaluate funding initiatives.

***Mutually reinforcing activities: Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.***

Here's where we need to take a look at the various bits and bricks of community knowledge that each of us brings and how we can bring them together for the greater good. This does not mean that all the actors agree to or need to do the exact same thing in an attempt to achieve the same objective. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In a successful Collective Impact initiative, identifying the ways in which each organization's activities mutually reinforce each other allows each participant to continue to focus on what they are good at and already do well, but with a greater understanding of the impact



that their unique contribution makes to the broader agreed-upon goals. This is where the knowledge and context that community knowledge brings to shared measurement systems contributes to our understanding of the interaction and intersectionality of service programs, heightening awareness that to address complex issues we need to use the many bits and bricks of our interventions in a coordinated and collaborative way.

***Continuous communication: Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.***

Most of the continuous communication that is needed to sustain Collective Impact is about shared measurement and the mutually reinforcing activities that drive the target indicators. In part, this comes down to a willingness to share our various bits and bricks openly, and in real time, and to contribute actively to this pool of knowledge. There is little capital to be gained by holding on to our pieces because the only way we are going to be able to innovate is by collaborating and looking at the bigger picture. It may sound silly in the context of our society's (and often our sector's) hyper-competitive paradigm, but imagine a card game in which all the players could put all of their cards on the table and combine their hands to create the best possible combinations as a group. And perhaps even draw more cards from the vast pool of community knowledge.

***Backbone support: Creating and managing Collective Impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.***

Canada's community foundations and other players in the community knowledge space are already well-positioned to play the role of backbone support for Collective Impact initiatives and are able to bring together the various players and help to coordinate and provide a platform or vehicle for community knowledge to be shared and acted upon. It is an axiom of current nonprofit practice NOT to create new organizations when launching new initiatives but rather to mobilize existing organizations and infrastructure to work in new ways. One of the pre-conditions of Collective Impact is to ensure sufficient resources, and drawing on the talents and capacity of community knowledge brokers is a good way to leverage investments. The Hamilton Community Foundation is just one example of this, as evidenced by the role it played in the development of the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction, a community-wide initiative to tackle the city's unacceptable levels of poverty.

## IN CONCLUSION

As we consider the role of community knowledge in Collective Impact, it is prudent to consider that while you might have all the right pieces, in many cases the order in which you put the pieces together and the interrelationship between the pieces is vital to success. Perhaps it is the right political climate, a particular technological advancement, or just having the right combination of players at the table. Sometimes, like a keenly observant six-year old, we need to hold onto a particular piece of LEGO. Wait patiently. Bring it forward, and click it into place at just the right time.

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The challenge that we face in participating in Collective Impact initiatives is that many of us are too busy acquiring new bricks, building our own projects, and protecting our individual inventories to realize that, collectively, we have already got more than enough pieces to go around. Let me illustrate our inherent blindness to this fact by asking you how many ways you think you could configure six identical eight-stud LEGO bricks. If you guessed half a dozen, you would be way off. Even a couple of thousand is far off the mark. 300,000 isn't even in the ball park. It is actually slightly more than 915 million different ways (Eiler, 2005). Now I ask you this: If six identical pieces of LEGO offer up 915 million potential configurations, just imagine what is possible for our communities.

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#### WEBSITES

Canadian Index of Wellbeing: <https://uwaterloo.ca/canadian-index-wellbeing>

Community Foundations of Canada: [www.cfc-fcc.ca](http://www.cfc-fcc.ca)

Global Cities Indicators Facility: [www.cityindicators.org](http://www.cityindicators.org)

Peel Counts: [www.peelcounts.ca](http://www.peelcounts.ca)

Peg: <http://www.mypeg.ca>

Vital Signs: [www.vitalsignscanada.ca](http://www.vitalsignscanada.ca)

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