

# Backbone Support: Essential for Successful Collective Impact

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Collective Impact – defined as “the commitment of a group of actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a complex social problem” – is an approach that’s gaining considerable momentum. This is due in no small part to the excellent work of John Kania and his colleagues at FSG Social Impact Consultants who have written a series of articles about it – including [Collective Impact \(PDF\)](#) and [Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work \(PDF\)](#) - published in the Stanford Social Innovation Review.

The underlying premise of Collective Impact is that no single organization can create large-scale, lasting change on complex social issues when they work alone. Strong organizations are necessary but not sufficient for achieving impact. Instead, large-scale social change requires a collaborative approach that involves those in government, civil society, and the business sector coordinating their efforts and working together around clearly defined goals.

This premise was central to the approach that Tamarack embraced more than a decade ago when we partnered with The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Caledon Institute for Social Policy to champion [Vibrant Communities \(VC\)](#), a pan-Canadian action-learning initiative which supported and explored promising local solutions for poverty-reduction. VC’s first phase – from 2002 to 2012 – provided concrete evidence and a rich body of learning that affirms that significant progress can be made to alleviate the complex issue of poverty using a place-based, multi-sector, collective impact approach.

One of the unexpected benefits of FSG's recent focus on Collective Impact is that it has served as a rallying point for a host of different organizations doing work in this way to find, learn from and collaborate with one another to accelerate the effectiveness of collective impact work. This was noted in a recent blog on the FSG website which observed, "People around the world, who were doing Collective Impact independently, have discovered that they are part of a community. Until now, they had no consistent way to describe their approach, no examples of success to substantiate their belief that this was a better way to work, no ability to learn from the thousands of others who were engaged in similar efforts without knowing it. All of a sudden, the experience that each person was slowly building up in isolation has become a field in which knowledge can grow exponentially. The name has helped foster a movement."

I am excited to announce that FSG and Tamarack are now collaborating to accelerate capacity-build and knowledge dissemination in the emerging field of Collective Impact. On April 16-18 we will be co-hosting [Champions for Change: Leading a Backbone Organization for Collective Impact](#) in Toronto. This dynamic learning experience has been designed to provide leaders of Backbone Support Organizations with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to successfully fulfil their central role. With support from Maytree and The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, this event will also highlight some inspiring Canadian examples of collective impact in action.

Providing effective "backbone support" is identified as one of the five critical conditions for collective impact. Backbone organizations play a complex, behind-the-scenes role in the success of these collective impact initiatives. In fact, the effectiveness with which a backbone organization fulfills its role often determines the success or failure of the collective impact initiative as a whole.

The role of the backbone organization spans six major activities:

- guiding vision and strategy;
- supporting aligned activities;
- establishing shared measurements;
- building public will;
- advancing policy change; and
- mobilizing funding.

The backbone organization essentially keeps the collaborative on track and moves it forward. Fulfilling this role requires a diversity of skills and is essential to maintain alignment across the partners.

If you are a leader of a backbone support organization or collaborative roundtable within a collective impact initiative, your participation at this event will contribute to the richness of this unique learning opportunity as we work together to grow the capacity in this emerging – and promising – field of community innovation.

We hope you can join us!

**Related Links:**

- Register to attend [Champions for Change: Leading A Backbone Organization for Collective Impact](#) – April 16-18, 2013 in Toronto
- Read [Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact \(PDF\)](#)
- Download [Collective Impact \(PDF\)](#) and [Channelling Change: Making Collective Impact Work \(PDF\)](#), FSG's two seminal articles on collective impact
- Listen to [Making Collective Impact Work](#), a Tamarack audio seminar with John Kania
- [Visit the FSG website](#) to find more on Collective Impact