UNDERSTANDING THE VALUE OF BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS IN COLLECTIVE IMPACT
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Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact

BY SHILOH TURNER, KATHY MERCHANT, JOHN KANIA AND ELLEN MARTIN

This article is adapted from its original publication in July 2012 as a four-part blog series in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, www.ssireview.org/blog.

Effective backbone support is a critical condition for collective impact. In fact, it is the number one reason that collective impact initiatives fail. In this publication, we provide communities and organizations engaged in collective impact with guidance on the role of the backbone and how to understand and support its effectiveness.

In the Greater Cincinnati region, collective impact has become the “new normal,” and The Greater Cincinnati Foundation (GCF) has made a commitment to support the infrastructure of collective impact – the backbone organization itself – in an effort to sustain and scale long-term systemic change and impact in the community. However, the role of the backbone organization in collective impact is complex and can be difficult to explain.

In early 2012, The Greater Cincinnati Foundation and FSG began a partnership to define the value of backbone organizations and better understand backbone effectiveness by working with six local backbone organizations and collective impact initiatives.

We learned that backbone organizations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measurement practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

Over time, backbone organizations can expect these activities to lead to changes among partners, funders, policymakers, and community members which, in turn, lead to more effective systems and improved community outcomes.

Through our research, we also gained insight into the value of backbone organizations and their leaders. Across organizations, the value of backbone support was commonly viewed as unmistakable; individual partners could not do the work of collective impact without it. In addition, backbone leaders must possess certain key characteristics that make them effective in the complex collective impact environment. Yet beyond these commonalities, the way that each backbone organization approaches the role varies depending on their context.

As a result of our work, GCF and FSG have created a community of practice of six regional backbone organizations. Through our process, backbone organizations are using the data we’ve collected to inform their individual work. They are also finding synergies among the group and taking opportunities to leverage each other’s efforts to feed common goals.
I. MAKING A COMMITMENT TO STRENGTHEN BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS

Communities and organizations around the world are adopting a different mindset to achieve large-scale systemic change through collective impact, a concept that was first introduced in the winter 2011 issue of Stanford Social Innovation Review and more recently discussed on the Stanford Social Innovation Review blog. As cross-sector groups engage more deeply in this practice, funders and practitioners alike find ourselves probing for answers to the question: How do you do this work well?

In Cincinnati, the collective impact model is a living, breathing—and evolving—practice. The community has embraced this approach to accelerating change across systems. And the community’s leaders are committing to making this ambitious work succeed.

GCF is leading the way for collective impact in the region. As a funder, GCF believes that providing “backbone support” (see text box) which propels collective impact efforts is critically important. The Foundation has taken a bold, if not “sexy,” step by investing in the support infrastructure of collective impact—the backbone organization itself—to accelerate change. If the Foundation is to succeed, everyone must understand what backbone organizations are and how they can be most effective.

In January 2012, GCF and FSG began exploring four big questions with a cohort of the region’s backbone organizations:

- How and to what extent are backbone organizations effective catalysts for achieving community-level progress?
- How and to what extent do backbone organizations contribute to improved social outcomes?
- How is success best measured for backbone organizations?
- What common challenges and best practices can be shared across backbone organizations?

We are sharing our experience to help funders see backbone support as a strategy to advance collective impact initiatives. We hope to build a common language and understanding for the role and value of backbone organizations so that all partners in a collective impact effort can articulate the need for and the importance of this vital element, and ensure the overall success of an initiative.

Cincinnati’s “New Normal”

In Cincinnati, collaboration is the "new normal," but this was not always the case. Like many regions, individual organizations and initiatives were doing important and effective work. But the overall economy still lagged behind its peers around the country. For this community, the collective impact model developed, almost organically, as organizations convened collaborative and coalitions to invent more effective methods for creating powerful and lasting social change.

Over the last 10 years or so, many strong backbone organizations were created to coordinate community initiatives and accelerate change. GCF played an important role in funding, incubating, or otherwise supporting many of these initiatives.

As an anchor institution, GCF has taken the long view on complex social problems when few others could; it has evidence that progress can be made when the community sticks with large-scale initiatives. Supporting collective impact has been a natural evolution in GCF’s community leadership. The Foundation believes that, by providing change capital to a group of backbone organizations, it will be able to accelerate progress toward social change in the region.

GCF and FSG’s Work Together

In addition to a leveraged, multi-year funding strategy, GCF chose to invest in evaluating the work of a cohort of backbone organizations and in creating a community of practice among them. Using this ap-

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If the Foundation is to succeed, everyone must understand what backbone organizations are and how they can be most effective.

The work of a backbone organization is complex. The roles played in accelerating change can be challenging to articulate as, by design, their work is largely behind the scenes. Therefore, GCF’s new approach to community leadership means that evaluating and communicating the value of backbone organizations has become all the more important. In addition, defining and communicating what “effectiveness” really means is another driver of the Foundation’s work. The backbone organization is an emerging concept necessary in the collective impact approach. GCF needs to paint a clear picture for stakeholders—board members, staff, donors, volunteers, current and potential grant recipients—of what success looks like and why this strategy is ultimately worth pursing. This is the challenge and task before us.

Key Learning: What Backbone Organizations Do

It is tempting to say (and our backbone organizations feel) that there are as many backbone models as there are collective impact initiatives. However, we found that there is, at some level, a common theory of change for backbone organizations that ultimately seeks to improve social outcomes by organizing cross-sector groups of partners to transform an often inefficient, fragmented system.

In order to fulfill this vision—regardless of their focus area—backbone organizations essentially pursue six common activities to support and facilitate collective impact which distinguish this work from other types of collaborative efforts. Over the lifecycle of an initiative, they:

1. Guide vision and strategy
2. Support aligned activities
3. Establish shared measurement practices
4. Build public will
5. Advance policy
6. Mobilize funding

As a collective impact initiative initially launches and gets organized, a backbone organization is likely to prioritize guiding vision and strategy and supporting aligned activities as two key activities. For example, in 2006, the Strive Partnership established the first ever “Cradle to Career” vision for the region’s urban core, including a roadmap for student success with shared goals and measures of student achievement. For the past six years, the Strive Partnership has maintained an active and engaged executive committee comprised of cross-sector leadership from Cincinnati (OH), Covington, and Newport (KY) to ensure that the shared vision and strategy...
Another example highlights two regional backbones working across state lines to address a large-scale issue. Recognizing a leadership gap in the area of environmental sustainability, Vision 2015 (KY) and Agenda 360 (OH) have played a critical role in organizing and incubating an intermediary organization, Green Umbrella. With their support, Green Umbrella has brought together several organizations—including many of the region’s businesses, education institutions, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies—to sustainably develop and grow the Greater Cincinnati area.

As backbone organizations mature, they often shift focus to establish shared measurement practices on behalf of their collective impact partners. For example, Partners for a Competitive Workforce (PCW), with its partners, has created a common, region-wide workforce data collection and reporting system to track results and improve performance for multiple agencies. To date, approximately 50 public and nonprofit agencies are utilizing the system, and a regional workforce dashboard is being built to aggregate key measures. Agenda 360 and Vision 2015 have also begun to identify and report on shared measures around several issues in the region as part of their regional indicators effort.

As backbone organizations seek to expand their impact and build a stronger community presence, they are likely to increase focus on other key external activities such as building public will, advancing policy, and mobilizing funding. For GCF’s cohort, these activities are by and large still areas for continued development and improvement, though we are seeing some early successes.

In order to build public will, LISC works with its neighborhood partners to engage community members at the grassroots level. Its Place Matters neighborhoods have generated increased attention from the city’s elected officials and policymakers. As an example, neighborhood leaders have taken on foreclosure as a policy issue, successfully bringing together diverse groups in the community to formulate a foreclosure response. Working with the city and courts, they have helped pass local legislation to mitigate the impact of foreclosure on their communities.

At the state level, Success By 6 is advancing policy by using local best practices and outcomes to educate policymakers and elected officials in Ohio and Kentucky about effective strategies to improve kindergarten readiness. Through its focus on measuring progress and using data to inform their work, Success By 6 and its partners have influenced the states’ thinking about measurement systems and the development of kindergarten readiness standards. Success By 6 is actively involved in efforts to create aligned early education and care systems, with membership on state committees such as the Early Childhood Advisory Council in Ohio and Kentucky. The work of Early Childhood Advisory Councils in both states created a comprehensive vision for early childhood which resulted in securing a $70 million Race to the Top Early Challenge Grant in Ohio. Through its committee participation, Success By 6 has played a role in defining elements of the system, identifying gaps in service and making the case for investing more in the region’s youngest children.

In order to mobilize funding for its partners, PCW is coordinating funds from diverse sources to support common priorities and strategies. Since 2008, PCW has leveraged more than $25 million in public and private funds from local, state, and national sources toward shared goals and strategies. This includes $4.6 million in philanthropic funds, $8.5 million in state and federal grants, and $11.9 million in aligned training funds from the region’s public workforce system.

The above examples illustrate how individual backbone organizations have ap-
proached these key activities. Yet, as we’ve learned by looking across the cohort, each organization engages in these activities to different degrees and in different ways, depending on the context and capacity of the organization and the scope and maturity of the initiative.

**Why It Matters: Expected Backbone Outcomes**

When asked how they know their work is making a difference, backbone leaders almost always talk about evidence of moving the needle on big community indicators, such as increasing the percentage of young people who enter kindergarten ready to learn. In fact, these six organizations already track progress on “big picture” indicators on behalf of their partners. But the focus of the GCF evaluation has been different.

Individual interviews and group working sessions generated the short-term and intermediate outcomes that could demonstrate the influence of backbone organizations’ activities on results of the collective impact process. Defining backbone process outcomes was an important step to tie the influence of their work to long-term initiative- and community-level outcomes. Some examples of expected outcomes generated by backbone organizations are listed above.

Based on the common activities and outcomes we defined, FSG asked external stakeholders and the backbone leaders themselves to assess their activities and contributions in each of the six areas, including the relative importance of each area, and to tell us what difference the backbone organizations had made in their respective collective impact efforts. Because assessing poses a significant challenge for many backbone organizations, FSG asked their stakeholders to complete the sentence, “If not for x backbone organization, y, z would not have hap-

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**Backbone Outcomes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Short-term Outcomes (Illustrative)</th>
<th>Intermediate Outcomes (Illustrative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guide vision and strategy</td>
<td>Partners share a common understanding of the need and desired result</td>
<td>Partners’ individual work is increasingly aligned with the initiative’s common agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support aligned activities</td>
<td>Partners increasingly communicate and coordinate their activities toward common goals</td>
<td>Partners collaboratively develop new approaches to advance the initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish shared measurement</td>
<td>Partners understand the value of sharing data</td>
<td>Partners increasingly use data to adapt and refine their strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build public will</td>
<td>Guide vision and strategy</td>
<td>More community members feel empowered to take action on the issue(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance policy</td>
<td>Partners increasingly communicate and coordinate their activities toward common goals</td>
<td>Policy changes increasingly occur in line with initiative goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize funding</td>
<td>Funding is secured to support initiative activities</td>
<td>Philanthropic and public funds are increasingly aligned with initiative goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 Community of practice is defined as a group of people with common professions or interests that convene with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally. (Adapted from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice)
pened in our community.”

Through surveys and interviews, we gathered compelling data. And as we completed the baseline analyses this spring, we grew excited to share the illuminating perspectives of roughly 130 stakeholders with the backbone leaders.

III. RESULTS OF INQUIRY: WHAT WE LEARNED

We heard many valuable perspectives on the backbone organizations’ work from partners, funders, advisors, and community members. Our key insights are summarized below.

1. Their value is unmistakable. If not for the backbone organizations’ contributions, stakeholders believe that “even more decisions in our community would be made by a small group of folks,” “communities would be simply in survival mode,” “the public wouldn’t have near the understanding of the challenges,” and “there wouldn’t be any coordinated program at all.” As one stakeholder said, “If they weren’t asking the right questions, we wouldn’t be [where we are today].” In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support. These representative comments help the backbones articulate their value and purpose to stakeholders.

2. GCF’s backbone cohort shares strengths in guiding vision and strategy and supporting aligned activities. All six backbone organizations received the highest marks for their effectiveness in these core areas. Interviewees said: “Prior to the establishment of [the backbone organization], our community lacked a collective direction for our region,” and “[the backbone organizations] bring a lot of people together; they are out understanding what activities are going on and how to align them.” The backbone leaders have been attentive to delivering value to their partners in these areas and are likely to continue to do so to maintain momentum. Furthermore, some backbones were also recognized for mobilizing funding, as exemplified through their success winning a Social Innovation Fund grant and other national funding opportunities.

3. Backbone organizations shift focus over time. By and large, this cohort of six backbone organizations has not yet placed a great deal of emphasis on building public will or advancing policy, but all expect to increase their time allocations and capacity in these areas in the future. Backbone organization leaders and their stakeholders alike feel that there is a natural progression from guiding vision and strategy, supporting aligned activities, and establishing shared measurement practices—all “inner circle,” partnership-focused activities—to gradually building toward broader externally-focused, community-level activities. For many, attention is beginning to shift to incorporating more external-facing activities into their work.

4. Backbone organizations’ partners need ongoing assistance with data. Although establishing shared measurement practices was seen broadly as a strength of many of the backbone organizations, building partners’ capacity to contribute and use data in a shared measurement system is a common area for improvement. As one partner described, “We do not have enough manpower to input data.” Backbones with limited staff capacity found it particularly challenging to consider taking on a greater technical assistance role in this area.

5. External communications, building public will, and advancing policy are common backbone challenges. We heard many stakeholders encourage the backbone organizations to improve communications about their own value and progress on the initiative. For example, we heard that “people don’t know what is being accomplished,” and “it’s hard to know how much progress they are making against their goals.” This mirrors the challenge we mentioned in Part I around articulating the backbone organizations’ value. In addition, stakeholders spoke of the need to build a more intentional strategy around public will and advocacy: “Even if there is not a lot of money available, to shape the public mind as to what the issues are is terribly important.” Most of the backbone organizations recognized that these areas needed additional attention and capacity, though they were also reluctant to place too much emphasis on advocacy without a clear opportunity to advance policy in a specific, targeted area.

In essence, individual organizations could not do the work of collective impact without backbone support.

While evaluation findings revealed many commonalities across backbone organizations, there were also several organization-specific challenges. For example, one organization has been pulled in too many directions and is now likely spread too thin to be very effective in all areas. Another needs to enlist more partners representing a broader cross-section of the region in order to effectively tackle the scope of the initiative. As GCF and the backbone leaders considered the relative
For those who are considering how to undertake or support a collective impact initiative, one fundamental truth about backbone effectiveness is that its leader can make or break the organization’s success.

importance of the messages emerging from the data, we started to identify the contextual nuances that can affect backbone performance, such as:

- **The phase** of the collective impact initiative (for example, whether the backbone is helping to initiate action, organize for impact, or sustain action and impact)
- **The capacity** of the backbone organization (for example, headcount, areas of expertise, financial resources)
- **The geographic reach and scope** of the collective impact effort (for example, one neighborhood versus a three-state region, early childhood learning versus community development)
- **Structural** opportunities and constraints created by a parent organization (for example, independent nonprofit versus program underneath a local chapter of a national network of organizations)

For many backbone organizations, the evaluation findings confirmed and clarified what they instinctively knew already about their work. FSG’s independent work had the additional benefit of providing a vehicle and forum for sharing the backbone organizations’ stories, raising awareness about common issues, and generating learning opportunities. The findings from our baseline assessment launched us into our hoped-for community of practice,2 and a new set of opportunities for learning and technical assistance over the coming months.

**IV. WHAT NEXT? LEADING AND LEARNING INTO THE FUTURE**

When GCF invested in supporting the core budgets of six local backbone organizations over a period of five years, the Foundation also undertook a broader effort to support evaluation and develop a community of practice for these grant recipients. Since January 2012, GCF and FSG have been focused on launching the latter effort.

A key question guiding our evaluation has been: How and to what extent are backbone organizations effective catalysts for achieving community-level progress? In FSG’s previous work on collective impact, reported in “Channeling Change,” the “intangibles” of the work—a key one is leadership identification and development—can be incredibly important in driving the progress of an initiative. In our baseline data collection, stakeholders shared with FSG their deep convictions and heartfelt sentiments about the backbone leaders they know best. In aggregate, the synthesized feedback confirmed a compelling picture of the importance of effective leadership among backbone organizations and the potential of collective impact overall (See text box).

For those who are considering how to undertake or support a collective impact initiative, one fundamental truth about backbone effectiveness is that its leader can make or break the organization’s success. This component of the evaluation captures some of the intangible “secret sauce” that helps us understand the backbone role going forward.

As the GCF-FSG team looks back on our process, we heavily front-loaded the first six months of developing the evaluation and technical assistance aspect of GCF’s funding initiative in order to ensure that it was built on a solid foundation. We established a community of practice with the cohort of backbone organizations. We developed the common theory of change across backbone organizations, as well as individual logic models. We conducted the baseline assessment of each

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Less than six months into the development of the community of practice, we are already seeing synergy across groups.

its own communications. Together with FSG, GCF has also developed a reporting template and dashboard that will help easily communicate results of the funding initiative.

GCF’s backbone grant recipients are already using what they’ve learned to inform and improve their work. Each has taken results back to their governing leadership, partners, and core supporters to discuss the implications their evaluation results have for their work. One backbone organization is challenging its current evaluation process and looking to collect more granular, neighborhood-level data. It has also researched best practices on effective communications strategies to show both quantitative and qualitative results, and has hired a communications team to develop a communications plan. Other backbone organizations are using the six core activities framework to help align their organizational structure around each activity area, and ensure that key activities are otherwise properly resourced.

Less than six months into the development of the community of practice, we are already seeing synergy across groups. Vision 2015, Agenda 360, Partners for a Competitive Workforce, and the Strive Partnership are working together on a labor market study called “2020 Job Outlook.” Four backbone organizations will share resources—leadership, connections, and cash—to develop a dataset that can drive the region’s collective vision and goals on job training and educational attainment. This example shows true partnership with a common agenda, driving a high impact regional initiative together.

The role of GCF in supporting collective impact also continues to evolve and grow. GCF provides support primarily through its grantmaking and capacity building support of backbone organizations. It has also been a partner in mobilizing funding by aligning its community investment framework5 with widely adopted community initiatives. And GCF has collaborated with United Way of Greater Cincinnati to lead the community dialogue around further refinement of shared community outcomes and measures.

FSG plans to expand the depth of its support for those groups pursuing collective impact by further exploring what it means to be a backbone organization. FSG also has other research efforts underway to develop insights on shared measurement, the role of funders, and the role that collective impact plays in addressing the complexity of social change. Our work in Cincinnati was discussed at the annual conference of the American Evaluation Association in October 2012.

With this incredible cohort of backbone leaders fully engaged in a community of practice, we now embark upon our next phase of work. We hope that the rationale, process, and results of our experience to date will resonate with other funders and practitioners who are making similar investments and facing similar opportunities and challenges. Creating large-scale systemic change via collective impact is a long-term proposition. Both GCF and FSG are dedicated to providing continued knowledge and tools for Cincinnati and other communities to help speed progress along the way.

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