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## *Feature*

### **Centering Equity in Collective Impact**

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# Centering Equity in Collective Impact

By John Kania, Junious Williams, Paul Schmitz, Sheri Brady, Mark Kramer & Jennifer Splansky Juster

Illustration by Julia Schwarz

*A decade of applying the collective impact approach to address social problems has taught us that equity is central to the work.*

**I**n 2011, two of us, John Kania and Mark Kramer, published an article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* entitled “Collective Impact.” It quickly became the most downloaded article in the magazine’s history. To date, it has garnered more than one million downloads and 2,400 academic citations. More important, it encouraged many thousands of people around the world to apply the collective impact approach to a broad range of social and environmental problems. Independent evaluations have confirmed that the approach can contribute to large-scale impact,<sup>1</sup> and a global field of collective impact practitioners has emerged. Their efforts have immeasurably deepened our understanding of the many factors that can foster or stymie collective impact’s success.

In the original article, we defined collective impact as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.” We further identified a structured process with five essential conditions that distinguish collective impact from other types of collaboration:

1. **A common agenda**, shaped by collectively defining the problem and creating a shared vision to solve it;
2. **Shared measurement**, based on an agreement among all participants to track and share progress in the same way, which allows for continuous learning, improvement, and accountability;
3. **Mutually reinforcing activities**, integrating the participants’ many different activities to maximize the end result;
4. **Continuous communication**, which helps to build trust and forge new relationships;
5. **A “backbone” team**, dedicated to aligning and coordinating the work of the group.

We also noted that these core elements would need to be adapted to the specific circumstances of each initiative.

Over subsequent years, many practitioners and collective impact networks<sup>2</sup> have refined and expanded on these five original conditions in helpful ways.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, together with the Collective Impact Forum—an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions to support practitioners of collective impact—we published eight additional principles of practice for implementing collective impact, which, importantly, included engaging community members and placing a priority on equity.

Reflecting on the past 10 years, we have observed through our own personal and professional journeys and the experience of others that the single greatest reason why collective impact efforts fall short is a failure to center equity. Thus, we believe that we must redefine collective impact to include centering equity as a prerequisite. In this vein, we propose a revised definition of the concept: *Collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions that advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change.* To center equity, collective impact efforts must commit to a set of actions that we will explore in this article.

## What Is Equity?

In committing to centering equity, we first confront the problem of inconsistent understandings of what equity means. Among many alternative definitions, each with its own virtues, the one we have found most helpful comes from the research and advocacy organization Urban Strategies Council: *Equity is fairness and justice achieved through systematically assessing disparities in opportuni-*



ties, outcomes, and representation and redressing [those] disparities through targeted actions.<sup>4</sup> This definition speaks to the needs of many different groups and populations that function daily under structural constraints that have for generations curtailed their ability to thrive, resulting in severe and compounding marginalization and oppression, regardless of where they live in the world. Only when collective impact efforts take the time to understand *who* has been marginalized and *why* and *how* they are experiencing marginalization, and, after such investigation, take *targeted action* to create policies, practices, and institutions that address current and historical inequities, will these communities be liberated to achieve their full potential.

In what follows, we focus on racial equity, as people of color are often the most structurally, institutionally, and interpersonally marginalized in the United States and many other countries.<sup>5</sup> We believe, however, that focusing on racial equity also enables us to introduce a framework, tools, and resources that can be applied to other areas of marginalization—including disability, sexual orientation, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and more.

Exploring the marginalization of people along multiple identities can also create space for taking an intersectional<sup>6</sup> approach to the work, recognizing that those holding multiple identities (e.g., women of color) are often worse off than others. We encourage practitioners to examine local data and listen to the experiences of people in their community to understand which populations are most systematically left behind, and then to work with marginalized populations to adapt the strategies shared here to improve their lives.

Given the heightened awareness of racial equity at this moment in time, sparked in part by the May 2020 murder of George Floyd and countless other, similar victims of racist violence, the disparate impact of COVID-19 on people of color, and growing recognition of the debilitating consequences of entrenched structural racism throughout society, our intensified focus on equity will come as no surprise to most. The challenge that we and so many others are grappling with, however, is the question of *how* to center equity in the practice of collective impact. We hope with this article to offer specific and practical guidance to those participating in collective impact efforts on what they need to be doing differently in their work to achieve this goal.

In particular, we believe that centering equity requires rethinking the supposed facts that define the problem by recognizing that marginalized populations within any community have experiences that are very different from those of many individuals and organizations who work to help them. As outsiders, we often don't know enough to be as helpful or effective as we should be, so we need first to talk, listen, and learn.

We have also come to recognize that collective impact has lasting effectiveness only if it is focused on changing underlying systems, not just adding new programs or services. Centering equity further requires diverse representation in leadership and specific strategies to shift power, so that those with formal power—in the United States and much of the Western world, mostly white and male—are able to engage with, listen to, share power with, and act on the wisdom of the community. Finally, everyone involved must recognize and take personal responsibility for their own roles in

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perpetuating and correcting inequities—a process of inner change that is often overlooked.

## How Equity Transforms Collective Impact

Centering equity alters the way practitioners implement collective impact. Consider the collective impact initiative Chattanooga 2.0, which launched in 2016 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and works to ensure that all children and youth receive a quality education and promising career opportunities. The effort named equity as a desired outcome from the start, but participants neither fully understood this nor proactively addressed it until the nation's recent racial justice awakening led them to recognize that an entirely new strategic plan was required.

"Part of the issue was that our community didn't have a shared lexicon about what equity meant, and so often community division seemed to hinge on semantics, instead of the actual issue at hand," says Molly Blankenship, the white executive director of Chattanooga 2.0's backbone team. A new strategic planning process to set the common agenda fielded a much more racially diverse, cross-sector group of residents and leaders that incorporated community input and explicit public commitments to action on racial equity. Chattanooga 2.0 also changed its governance structure to increase racial and positional diversity and to ensure transparency. All members of the coalition were asked to sign a public letter committing to equity in both process and outcome.

Chattanooga 2.0 also restructured its measures of progress to disaggregate data by race, revealing stark differences within the community. They explicitly named and addressed power imbalances that affected communication and relationships among participants, thereby shifting the internal culture to ensure that contributions from all members of the collaborative were valued equally. They also focused on building empathy and understanding among leaders engaged in the work, especially those who lacked direct experience of the issues. "As power accumulates, the ability to relate to those who have been disenfranchised and disempowered often diminishes," Blankenship says.

Chattanooga 2.0's attention shifted from programmatic interventions to more systemic changes, such as working with the city of Chattanooga to transition from a patchwork of providers to a more coordinated and aligned early-childhood educational system. Even the backbone team had to reconceptualize its role. With the support of her executive and steering committees, Blankenship stepped into a new capacity.

“As a white leader who feels a great deal of onus in this work, I can provide cover for coalition members to do bolder work,” she says. “I can utilize my privilege to make space for and elevate the voices of BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and people of color] leaders and community members. And I can use my own voice—the platform and political capital I’ve been afforded—to speak the truths that need to be spoken, to stand in the crosshairs, where appropriate, and be helpful to our coalition’s beneficiaries.”

Blankenship’s experience highlights the steps required by those with power to center equity in collective impact and better serve the communities they seek to help. Without explicitly articulating the work to center equity and making space to do that work, collective impact efforts will fall short in their potential to dismantle long-standing inequities, repair historical injustices, and advance better outcomes for those who have been left behind.

### Five Strategies for Centering Equity

Fortunately, many collective impact efforts around the world have already made progress in centering equity. In studying equity-focused collective impact efforts across regions and issues, we see five strategies in particular emerging as critical to centering equity:

1. Ground the work in data and context, and target solutions.
2. Focus on systems change, in addition to programs and services.
3. Shift power within the collaborative.
4. Listen to and act with community.
5. Build equity leadership and accountability.

None of these strategies is new, yet they remain areas that require understanding and commitment to do well. Taken together, they form the basis for a comprehensive and integrated approach to centering equity in collective impact. Let’s consider them in turn.

**Strategy #1: Ground the work in data and context, and target solutions.** | Grounding the work in appropriate data and context requires that participants in the collective impact initiative develop a new and shared understanding of terminology, history, data, and personal stories. Many widely accepted but false and damaging narratives in our society are used by those with power—intentionally or not—to conceal structural racism. Long before analyzing data or proposing solutions, participants must create a shared language of agreed definitions about race and equity.<sup>7</sup>

Further, participants must share a more accurate understanding of the origins and nature of existing inequities. This awareness must include an appreciation of the difference between structural racism and personal blame, as well as the development of empathy beyond individual feelings of guilt among the privileged or shame among marginalized people. Effective anti-racist equity work almost always starts with a deeper understanding of history.

We see this strategy in the work of Zea Malawa, MD, a Black female public-health professional, practicing pediatrician, and mother who leads Expecting Justice, the backbone for a collective impact initiative focused on improving infant and maternal health among Black and Pacific Islander families in San Francisco. Despite the city’s wealth, one in seven Black babies is born prematurely—

double the rate of white babies. Since its inception, Expecting Justice has oriented its entire effort toward addressing racial inequities as the root cause of disparate birth outcomes.

“I always try to think about how we might make anti-racism seem irresistible,” Malawa says. Her team begins by ensuring that all participants understand the history behind the data. “People can identify that others may be poor, and that their health is suffering because they’re poor, but most times they can’t tell you why,” she explains. “And in the absence of being able to describe why, people come up with really racist cultural assumptions.”

To reframe the issue, Malawa highlights critical moments in American history, from the time of slavery in the United States to modern forms of oppression that have denied Black people the opportunity to fairly participate in American economic progress.<sup>8</sup> Deliberate government endorsement of redlining practices in financing homeownership after World War II, for example, is the reason people of color were segregated into impoverished neighborhoods and denied access to homeownership, and thereby cut off from the primary source of intergenerational wealth for white middle-class families. Malawa shows redlining maps from decades ago that precisely trace the outlines of low-income neighborhoods today.

Malawa offers further help to those leaders in the Expecting Justice effort who do not have much direct experience with the community the initiative serves so that they better grasp the drivers of inequity. For example, she constructed four different scenarios illustrating structural barriers for women facing childbirth—on a spectrum from racially marginalized to racially privileged, and then engaged steering-committee members in developing a “map of understanding” for the expecting mother in each scenario, highlighting how the obstacles and challenges increase for racially marginalized mothers.

False narratives live not only in history but in the data we collect today. We are accustomed to describing society’s problems with aggregate data: the national unemployment rate, high school graduation rates, the number of people living below the poverty line, or the percent of neonatal fatalities. Aggregate data, however, mask variations by characteristics such as race and ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, income levels, and geography. Unless the data is disaggregated, we cannot truly understand problems, develop appropriate solutions, or document progress.

For example, we witnessed the harm that can arise from the failure to disaggregate data and target solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many jurisdictions were not collecting and/or reporting infection rates or testing data by race and ethnicity and learned later about disparate and possibly preventable rates of illness.<sup>9</sup>

Simply obtaining disaggregated data can pose a challenge, because they are often not collected with sufficient specificity, such as data collected for “Asians” without specifying national origin. The lack of precisely disaggregated data conceals many problems and can result in ineffective programs and policies. One important systemic change that can come from collective impact efforts is advocacy to public agencies, researchers, and other custodians of administrative data sets to improve the precision of their data collection and reporting practices to support more equitable analysis and more targeted solutions.

Disaggregated data are essential but not sufficient. Centering equity in the work of collective impact requires a more holistic

understanding of the life experience of marginalized populations that can come only from interviews, surveys, focus groups, personal stories, and authentic engagement. Too often data sets, particularly data sets that are solely quantitative, fail to capture important context that only the people most impacted and those closest to them know, and groups interpreting the data do not often include those with lived experience when making sense of the data. To address this problem, many collective impact efforts begin with “data walks,” in which all participants in the collective impact effort, including organizational leaders and residents with lived experience of the issues, review easy-to-understand visual data and together analyze, interpret, and create shared meaning about what the data say.

Expecting Justice has made putting data into the appropriate context a core principle of its work. A majority of its steering committee is composed of white leaders from government agencies and other large organizations, many of whom have limited direct contact with mothers and families, but it also includes several Black and Pacific Islander mothers. The backbone team recognized the need to elevate these mothers’ experience as essential data and spent several months building trust and relationships with the group to create space for them to share their stories as part of the steering committee’s context-building work about preterm birth.

The very act of seeking out and listening to stories from the affected group can provide a foundation for building trust with community stakeholders. Active use of stories can also serve to locate and center the narrative for change in the community. This step can shift conversations about solutions from more conventional programmatic responses to more systemic solutions focused more concretely on achieving greater equity.

Once collective impact efforts have drawn sufficient insight from historical context and disaggregated quantitative data and qualitative data outlining the experience of those being marginalized, participants must target strategies differentially to subgroups to achieve better community outcomes. The targeted universalism approach of John A. Powell, of UC Berkeley’s Othring & Belonging Institute, demonstrates one way to operationalize racial equity through targeting interventions to subgroups. “Fairness is not advanced by treating those who are situated differently as if they were the same,” Powell says. “A targeted universal strategy is one that is inclusive of the needs of both the dominant and marginal groups but pays particular attention to the situation of the marginal group.”<sup>10</sup>

Targeted universalism importantly argues that our goal should be not just reducing disparities but moving everyone to better outcomes. If only 50 percent of white children read at grade level and 30 percent of Black children read at grade level, closing the disparity still leaves 50 percent of children below grade level. We may have a universal goal for our community, such as reading proficiency, but we need to understand the different barriers various subgroups face and tailor our strategies and resources to address those specific barriers. Failing to target interventions is likely to maintain, and sometimes exacerbates, the existing disparities.

**Strategy #2: Focus on systems change, in addition to programs and services.** | Equitable outcomes and solutions that focus on addressing root causes of social problems at a community, regional, or national level cannot be achieved one program at a time. They require deeper changes in public and private systems, structures, policies,

and culture that consistently produce, and often were designed to produce, racist or otherwise inequitable outcomes.

Systems change is an often discussed but little understood concept. One framework that has proven useful to many collective impact practitioners is to consider system changes at three levels of explicitness.<sup>11</sup> First is the level of structural change: shifts in policies, practices, and resource flows. This level is explicit, in that people engaged in the system can readily identify these conditions. Second is the level of relational change—specifically, relationships and connections, and power dynamics among people or organizations. This level tends to be semiexplicit in that sometimes people can see these dynamics and sometimes they happen out of sight of some players in the system. The third level of systems change is transformative change—the mental models, worldviews, and narratives behind our understanding of social problems. This level is typically implicit in the effort but has the most power to guide individual and system behavior over the long term.

When engaging in systems-change work, many people and organizations invest the bulk of their time and resources in attempting to change conditions at the first level. Such structural solutions are important. However, changing structure without shifting relationships, power dynamics, and mental models can lead to irrelevant, ineffective, unaccountable, and unsustainable solutions. This tendency particularly holds if the solutions were developed in a context where marginalized groups had no voice and power. Collective impact efforts must therefore work concurrently at all three levels of systems change in order to bring about deeper, more sustainable change.

While systems-change work is essential to achieving equity, progress is typically longer term and not visible to community members who are struggling today. Interventions that improve programs and services meet people’s needs now and often keep residents and community members active in the collaborative’s efforts because their impact is more tangible and relevant to people’s daily lives. Programmatic work also can inform the structural, systems, and policy changes needed to achieve larger outcomes. Most high-capacity collective impact efforts work at both programmatic and systems levels in ways that center equity. Expecting Justice provides one example.

In its programmatic efforts, Expecting Justice works to strengthen and expand existing programs to meet more immediate needs of Black and Pacific Islander mothers in San Francisco. For example, Expecting Justice cultivated funding to support and expand the offerings of SisterWeb, a San Francisco community doula network. Research shows that doula care contributes to improved labor and delivery outcomes, especially for low-income women of color, and expanding this program has potential for immediate benefit for parents in San Francisco.

In its systems efforts, Expecting Justice is engaged at all three levels of systems change. At the structural level, Expecting Justice is launching the Abundant Birth Project—a pilot program to provide unrestricted supplemental income during pregnancy and for six months postpartum to Black and Pacific Islander mothers in San Francisco. This guaranteed income for mothers during pregnancy is the first of its kind in the United States, paving the way for a broader, state-funded basic income program in California, and its impacts will be studied for further policy implications for San Francisco and beyond. At the relational level of systems change,

Expecting Justice has built trust among providers and community members and shifted power in decision-making. For example, mothers with lived experience have the “last word” in the steering committee before any votes are taken. And at the transformative level of systems change, Expecting Justice has worked to eliminate the racist mental models and conscious or unconscious biases of white supremacy in San Francisco’s health-care and social-service systems. Through reframing the issue and disaggregating data, the organization is changing mental models of why preterm births are occurring and raising awareness of the structural, institutional, and interpersonal racist root causes of preterm birth.

As collective impact efforts seek to shift systems, they must also adapt measurement, evaluation, and learning to track and learn from changes in these systems, in addition to changes in individual outcomes. Take, for example, the Aspen Institute’s Opportunity Youth Forum, which supports collective impact efforts across the United States to improve outcomes for young people who are disconnected from work and school. It tracks not only aggregate outcomes for

collective impact effort began by using data to initiate meaningful conversations among residents and service providers to build trust and establish a shared vision. Indigenous leaders then worked with statewide organizations and philanthropies to create the Marangunga Justice Reinvestment Project, which aims to redirect funding from criminal justice to preventative, diversionary, and community development initiatives that address the root causes of crime.

While the effort has involved all parties that hold decision-making power over children, the work is guided by the tribal council representing the 21 Aboriginal groups. Government institutions, instead of leading the way they typically have since colonization, now follow the community’s lead. Aboriginal community-led teams work in partnership with service providers and make sure to account for all kids. The shift in power to community has led to better outcomes, with substantial decreases in major offenses and increases in supports that help children thrive, such as having a positive adult relationship in their life. Where previously community members had little agency in how decisions were made, they now help set community priorities, influence the distribution of public and private resources, and hold programs and systems accountable.

Many people are more comfortable talking about diversity and inclusion than about power, but without addressing power, efforts that highlight diversity only scratch the surface. Frontline Solutions, a Black-owned consulting firm serving the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, defines power as “the ability or authority to influence others, to decide who will have access to resources, and to define reality or exercise control over oneself or others.” Some hold power as a result of

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## *Too often, we focus on diversity to change who sits at the table without changing the underlying dynamics of decisions made at the table by shifting culture and power.*

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young people (e.g., earning a high school diploma or equivalent, enrolling in postsecondary education, obtaining employment) but also shifts in systems (e.g., evidence of changes in community power, revisions of narratives, improved pathways, shifts in public policy, changes in funding). Systems-change measures identify whether the systems that hold problems in place are changing to better support equity for the target population. Often, qualitative data provide more meaningful measurements of systems change than quantitative measures, because qualitative information helps to make meaning of the complex dynamics inherent in systems and also provides insight into why changes in the system occur.

**Strategy #3: Shift power within the collaborative.** | Public policies, rules, and resource flows are too often controlled by individuals who don’t reflect or represent the populations whom their decisions affect. Realizing equitable outcomes and achieving systems change requires shifting power to the affected.

Consider a collective impact effort from the remote town of Bourke, 800 kilometers (500 miles) northwest of Sydney, Australia. The crime and incarceration rates of Aboriginal populations as of 2017 were among the highest in the country. The politics of problem-solving in the small town where members of 21 different Aboriginal groups live are complicated by its history of forced removal and resettlement by white colonialism. Because residents were concerned that everyone else in the system had more information and power, the

formal positions, some by virtue of controlling financial resources, others through the influence of their relationships. Those who control resources and set policies—government leaders, philanthropists, business leaders, and leaders of large institutions, such as hospitals and universities—have greater power not only in society but often in collective impact governance as well.

Engaging such leaders in the collective impact process is part of what can make it effective: They can make large-scale changes, have the influence to shift narratives, and bring necessary resources, yet they are often removed from the populations whom their decisions affect. In the United States and much of the Western world, those in power are typically white and male. Too often, we focus on diversity to change who sits at the table without changing the underlying dynamics of decisions made at the table by shifting culture and power. Equitable results require more equitable decision-making tables.

Power also exists in communities where individuals have relationships and influence that provide the knowledge, trust, and credibility essential to the success of collective impact. Too many early collective impact efforts reflected top-down decision-making, aggregating institutional leaders who had less connection to, authentic knowledge of, or credibility with partners and community members. Many faced community resistance, were unsuccessful at aligning needed partners, and missed the mark on outcomes, learning the hard way that lived experi-

ence and context expertise<sup>12</sup> needed to better inform decisions. Having both institutional and community leaders share power in decision-making is critical to aligning resources, partners, and communities to move programmatic and systems changes. However, two problems often emerge when decision-making groups become more diverse. First, collective impact leaders don't develop or nurture an inclusive culture, so those with more institutional or resource power either dominate or receive deference. Second, those with institutional or resource power resist more inclusive processes that are less efficient and involve uncomfortable conversations or disagreements, so they either abandon the table or delegate their role to others with less influence.

In our experience, shifting power in a collaborative requires explicit attention and intention. Leaders must agree on the importance of practicing equity to produce equitable outcomes and must be willing to change their decision-making processes and give up some of their power. However, leaders must clearly define the purpose of community engagement—why it is necessary to their programmatic and systems-change goals. Otherwise, the commitment wanes and community members sense weakened determination.

Many observers believe that shifts in power occur only as the result of large, dramatic events. But change can also come from numerous small events—newly shared data and stories, relationships developed, the problem experienced directly—that cause minds and hearts to shift. Over time, power can shift toward equity in previously inconceivable ways. Backbone staff and steering-committee members can encourage the building of relationships and empathy among members by hosting meals with small groups of diverse participants to learn about each other's backgrounds, motivations, and commitment to the initiative. Backbone staff can also host meetings in community spaces; meet around small tables, instead of big board tables, to stimulate conversation; and facilitate a transparent and fair culture that names and negotiates uncomfortable dynamics and builds trust across members. These may all seem like small steps, but they can create surprising and powerful outcomes.

The Jackson Collaborative Network's experience in shifting power in a relatively conservative Michigan county is instructive. Monica Moser, the white CEO of the Jackson Community Foundation, explains that the network began with data: "The racial disparities were striking and clear, and we also brought the stories of residents to illustrate the barriers that create these disparities." In 2020, to change power dynamics and support more inclusive engagement, the network reorganized its work around addressing the root causes of inequities by substantially increasing the diversity of its steering committee and creating leadership opportunities within the committee for participants representing both grassroots and organizational leadership. Relationships and trust have been essential ingredients in the change, but they took time to develop.

"We have rich relationships with grassroots leaders we didn't have before," Moser says. "We didn't stop by just empathetically interviewing residents with lived experience—we engaged them to help design solutions and to evaluate how they worked. They saw their influence."

**Strategy #4: Listen to and act with community.** | When we look honestly at the roots of challenges facing many communities, we find that we must move from working in communities to working with

communities and supporting work by communities. If we recognize, for example, the difficulty of reaching 12,000 women of childbearing age in six zip codes with high disparities in birth outcomes, we will grasp that those who are already in relationship with and trusted by those women are essential to producing our intended outcomes. Families, friends, neighbors, and groups already operating in the community have the knowledge, skills, and experience essential for producing equitable change.

Listening to community requires trust and engagement; it cannot happen via a one-off focus group or a quick survey. It requires knowing our intended beneficiaries and our proximity to them. Listening is often more continuous and organic when the backbone team and leadership table include people who share the backgrounds of intended beneficiaries, live in the neighborhoods served, and have direct experience with the issues being addressed. If members of the backbone, steering committee, and working groups do not include this diversity of community perspectives, they should work with partners who have the trust to bring a range of community perspectives to the table. After all, no one person can be the voice of a community, so a range of voices should be heard.

More transformative and equitable change happens, however, when we act with community, recognizing and building on the people and power it contains. This approach requires that we see communities and residents as assets, rather than as problems to be solved.<sup>13</sup> It recognizes the talent and commitment of residents, the importance of local relationships, and the value of institutions run by community members as the building blocks of change. Rejecting "white savior" approaches from the outside, such asset-based efforts ask, What problems do communities want to solve, what power do communities already have, and what solutions are they already creating that we can support? We begin to recognize, for example, that the woman who checks in on young mothers in the neighborhood is part of public health and the shop owner who mentors local boys participates in youth development. The question is not who serves or works in a community but who is trusted by members of the community.

Hope Starts Here (HSH), an early-childhood partnership in Detroit, illustrates what it means to listen to and build on trusted community relationships. Since its inception, HSH has focused on families' and organizations' ability to navigate the early-childhood system. HSH has developed an infrastructure for parent engagement that includes parent leads for each of the initiative's strategic imperatives, seven community outreach coordinators—each living in the district where they coordinate—and a team of specialists as "boots on the ground" in each district. Through these specialists, parents are trained on childhood brain development so they can influence state policy, advocate for quality early-childhood experiences for their children, and adopt best practices to use at home.

"Community is truly leading and shaping this work," says Camarrah Morgan, the Black community engagement co-coordinator. "We know how to navigate the system and how to get resources so that when funding for HSH is done, there will still be an engine to advocate for ourselves and for our children."

**Strategy #5: Build equity leadership and accountability.** | Our focus here is on leadership and accountability that centers equity in the work by advancing the strategies discussed in this article. This leadership must not be centralized but should be distributed throughout



the collective impact effort with backbone staff and collective impact stakeholders, such as steering-committee members, working groups chairs and funders, partner organizations, and the broader community.

What does it mean for the backbone organization to lead with an equity focus? First, it means having a backbone team that reflects the diversity of the population that the group serves. For many efforts, this will require changing or expanding the backbone team and may require existing backbone team members to make greater space for different perspectives, especially the voices of people with lived experience, or funders to support expanding the team to better reflect the community.

Although many collective impact practitioners envision the backbone role as an impartial broker, the backbone cannot, and should not, be neutral when it comes to explicitly elevating the importance of equity in the group's work. Equally important, other leaders in the effort must embrace an unwavering focus on equity.

This commitment means holding people in positions of power—most often white leaders—accountable for progress in their own personal and organizational equity work. Beyond reframing the issue to recognize how structural, organizational, and interpersonal racism or other forms of oppression have contributed to the problem, leaders must do personal, deep introspection to understand their own contributions to the status quo.

Personal ownership and accountability can take many forms. For white leaders, it can mean taking a public stand to name racism, even when it feels risky. It can also involve publicly naming their or their organization's past racism and acknowledging harms done. It also means holding other leaders responsible for acting to eliminate racism.

Structurally, maintaining accountability for equity leadership can be difficult because collective impact is a nonhierarchical approach. The steering committee and backbone, for example, do not hold formal authority over those engaged in the work. As a result, only peers and shared expectations of the group can maintain accountability. In Jackson, Michigan, for example, Moser once reprimanded one of the foundation's largest donors for a racist statement he made publicly. Her board, who had together been deepening their understanding of racial equity, backed her even though they risked losing the funds. "It set a standard and measure for others that says we are serious," Moser says.

Expecting Justice has built peer accountability into its collective impact work in several ways. The effort uses racial affinity groups, or caucuses, to create a forum for participants of color to discuss issues together, and for white participants to support each other in doing their individual inner work related to racial equity. The effort also promotes the use of "accountability buddies"—finding a trusted partner with whom participants can share their personal dedication to and progress on racial equity commitments. Finally, honoring the expertise of the mothers with lived experience in the group by giving them the last word on the steering committee before a decision is made is a powerful reminder that accountability to mothers and their babies is Expecting Justice's ultimate purpose.

## Our North Star

Collective impact has never been a rigid framework that guarantees success. It is an approach that must be adapted to the circumstances of each community and issue. The past decade has seen continued

enthusiasm for the concept. More important, the thousands of people working in different contexts around the world have learned and refined the approach. Of the many lessons practitioners have learned, the most important by far is the importance of centering equity in the work.

We are grateful to the many partners and groups who have helped us learn and evolve our thinking about the centrality of equity, and we hope that many more will utilize the five strategies outlined here with the sense of urgency they demand. Without determined attention to these and other equity strategies on the ground, collective impact will run the risk of reinforcing, instead of eliminating, the inequities at the root of the challenges we aim to solve. If attaining equity and justice is our north star, we must begin with the end in mind. ■

## Endnotes

- 1 See, e.g., the 2018 report *When Collective Impact Has Impact* by Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact.
- 2 To name just a few, the Collective Impact Forum in the United States, Tamarack Institute in Canada, and Collaboration for Impact in Australia.
- 3 Many social-change practitioners have significantly influenced our thinking about equity in a collective impact context, including Melody Barnes, Angela Glover Blackwell, Barbara Holmes, Vu Le, Mark Leach, Michael McAfee, Monique Miles, Steve Patrick, Sheryl Petty, John A. Powell, and Tom Wolff.
- 4 We have slightly adapted Urban Strategies Council's definition of equity by adding in the notion of representation as a crucial area of assessment in the work.
- 5 The examples focusing on racial equity included in this article are drawn primarily from the United States, given the authors' knowledge and networks. Other global communities are doing their own equity work relevant to local and culturally specific contexts. In Bangalore, India, for example, a collective impact effort, Saamuhika Shakti, focuses on improving outcomes for waste pickers, with a focus on women and children. In South Korea, civil society, public institutions (or government), and businesses have together developed a collective impact initiative, Good Job 5060, for job creation, with a focus on older Koreans, because workers ages 50 and up are often forced into early retirement, which results in economic difficulties and low self-esteem (or poor socioeconomic status). And in Colombia, the Global Opportunity Youth Network (GOYN)'s anchor partner, GOYN Bogotá, is identifying and addressing systemic issues that Opportunity Youth (young people ages 15-29 who are out of school, unemployed, or working in informal jobs) and migrants face.
- 6 Intersectionality, as introduced by the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, is "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups."
- 7 Fortunately, many resources are available to help groups do that. See, e.g., Center for the Study of Social Policy's *Key Equity Terms & Concepts*, City of Durham's "Racial Equity Terms and Definitions: Shared Language," International City/County Management Association's "Glossary of Terms: Race, Equity, and Social Justice," and the University of Washington School of Public Health's "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Glossary of Terms."
- 8 See Zea Malawa, Jenna Gaarde, and Solaire Spellin, "Racism as a Root Cause Approach: A New Framework," *Journal of Pediatrics*, vol. 147, no. 1, 2021. The article both analyzes the causes of inequity for specific marginalized groups and offers a framework to dismantle inequities.
- 9 See Aletha Maybank, "Why Racial and Ethnic Data on COVID-19's Impact Is Badly Needed," *American Medical Association*, April 8, 2020.
- 10 John A. Powell, "Post-Racialism or Targeted Universalism," *Denver Law Review*, vol. 86, no. 3, 2009.
- 11 This framework is explained more fully in the 2018 FSG report *The Waters of Systems Change* by John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge.
- 12 Lived experience or context expertise is gained directly from personal or family experience with the issues you are addressing, from living or having lived in the neighborhood you are serving, and from working closely with intended beneficiaries through close relationships. This contrasts with learned experience or content expertise, which is secondhand learning not gained from deep and direct relationships and experience.
- 13 The Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University offers many resources to help groups learn approaches that support community-driven work. Another great resource is BME's asset-framing resources, which address the narratives that often underlie problematic thinking about Black and other marginalized populations.