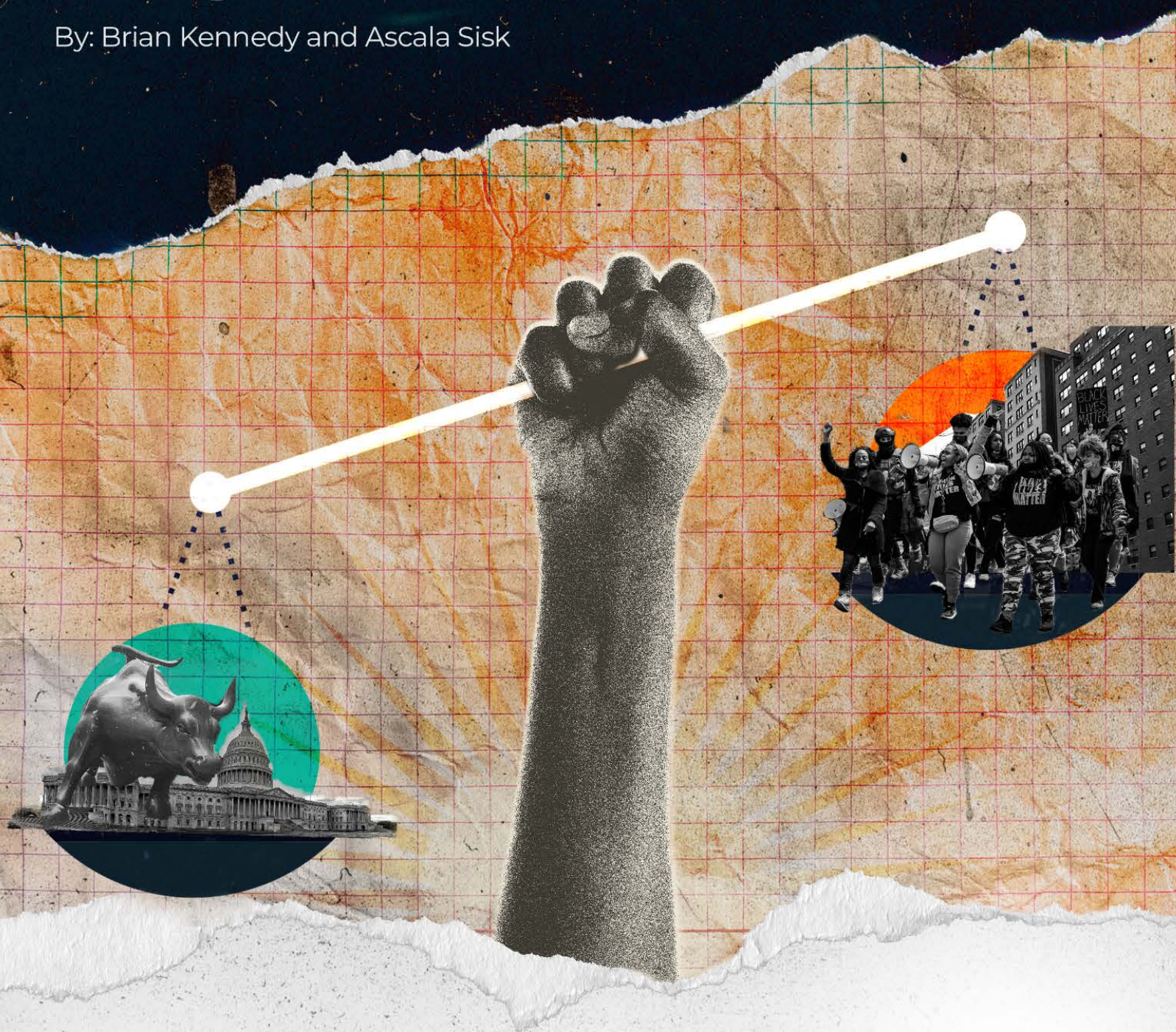


## REBALANCING POWER:

# Examining the Role of Advocacy and Organizing in Collective Impact

By: Brian Kennedy and Ascala Sisk



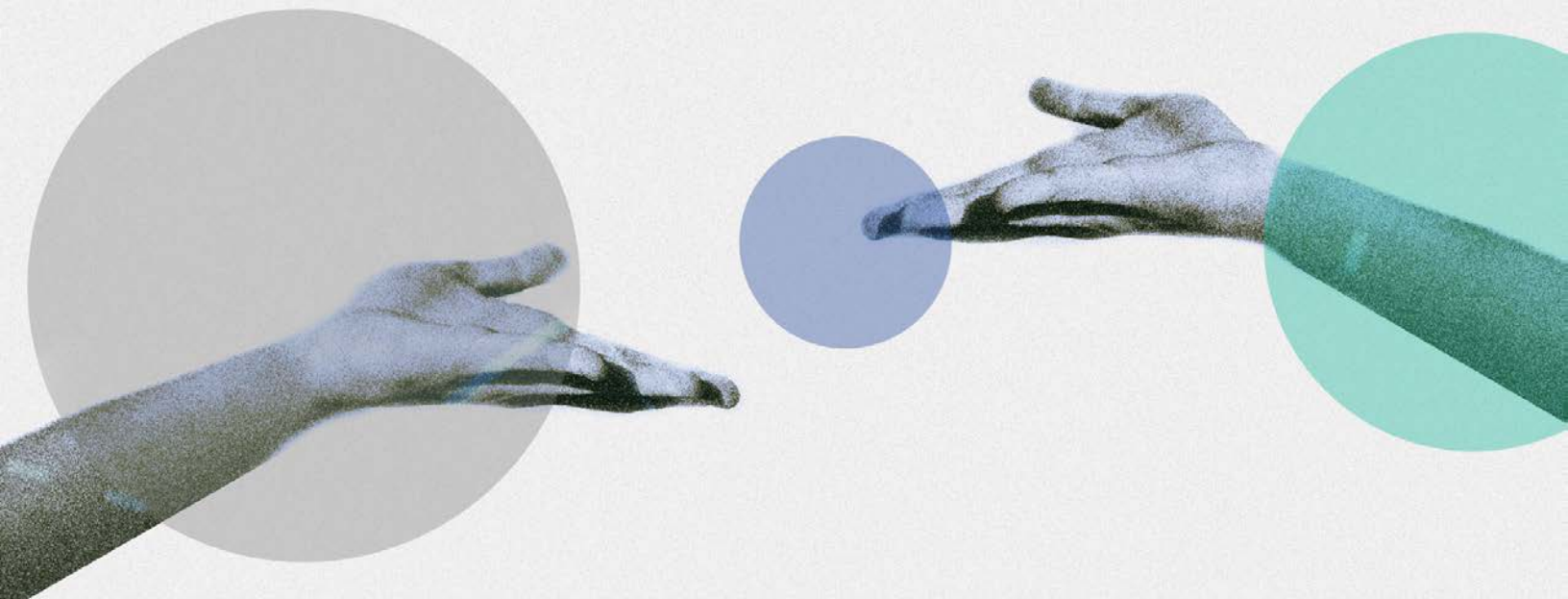
COLLECTIVE  
IMPACT FORUM

FSG



**FRONTLINE**  
SOLUTIONS





# Executive Summary

Frontline Solutions was engaged by the Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, to conduct research on how collective impact initiatives can leverage advocacy and organizing to create more equitable systems and policy outcomes. Frontline's research was guided by the following questions: How can advocacy and community organizing strengthen collective impact efforts and why aren't they used more frequently? How can collective impact efforts become more effective at changing power structures? What promising strategies used within collective impact efforts can create systems change?

## Methodology

In early 2021, Frontline conducted 25 interviews with collective impact initiative leaders and backbone institutions, thought leaders, funders, advocacy and organizing institutions, and staff from FSG and the Aspen Institute. Frontline also conducted a review of case studies and the literature on collective impact, equity, advocacy, and community organizing.

## Findings

Our analysis of interviews, the literature, and case studies produced several major findings:

### **How can advocacy and community organizing strengthen collective impact efforts, and why aren't they used more frequently?**

Community organizing and policy advocacy are critical but underutilized strategies for realizing equitable systems change. Creating equity through collective impact work requires dismantling inequitable systems boldly, artfully, and persistently. When collective impact efforts embody the primary tenets of community organizing—deep and sincere resident engagement, analysis of power, and capacity to address conflict—they are more likely to be equitable, inclusive, and impactful. A major barrier that prevents collective impact efforts from leveraging advocacy and organizing is the fact that many funders avoid contributing to efforts that can be perceived as partisan, even when those efforts are legal.

### **How can collective impact become more effective at changing power structures?**

Partners must address and disrupt both internal and broader political power dynamics in order for collective impact to lead to equitable changes in systems and structures. Collective impact efforts have created meaningful, tangible change in specific policies. Yet political, economic, and historical power structures contribute to deep-rooted, systemic inequities. Marginal reforms fall short of disrupting how power is distributed. Intentional conversations about race, gender, and oppression can help collective impact efforts reckon with their own internal power dynamics. These conversations can lead to revamping structures, strategies, and objectives to work for systems change in cities and communities.

### **What promising strategies used within collective impact can create systems change?**

Institutions should not sacrifice “outsider” approaches that are endemic to community organizing in favor of “insider” strategies. Those employing an “insider” strategy by working to build relationships with system leaders sometimes feel at odds with those using an “outsider” strategy by exerting public pressure. Community organizing inherently requires autonomy from the traditional power players who are sometimes involved in collective impact efforts.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of our research, we make the following recommendations for those engaged in collective impact efforts:

### 1. Incorporate the values and principles of community organizing.

Democratize the early design process of a collective impact initiative. Identify the limitations of the initiative for engaging in advocacy, and seek resources to build needed organizing skills. Consider engaging professional facilitators to mitigate internal power imbalances.

### 2. Create the conditions that are necessary to engage in advocacy.

Prioritize advocacy as a way to create a stronger civic infrastructure.<sup>1</sup> Be strategic about deciding when to engage public officials, balancing the desire to cultivate powerful allies with the autonomy needed for advocacy, organizing, and “outsider” strategies.

### 3. Build relationships and trust, particularly with grassroots and community-based organizations.

Forge a culture of transparency and collective decision-making, prioritize active trust-building, and create metrics to evaluate relationship-building.

## Call to Reflection

The following questions may help backbone organizations to reflect on how they can leverage advocacy and organizing to create systems change in their collective impact endeavors:

- ➔ Who are the organizers and advocates, and how are they involved in decision-making?
- ➔ What tensions (historical and contemporary) exist among stakeholders and partners?
- ➔ Who will carry this work forward in the long term? Are they engaged as equal partners?

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick, S., and Brady, S. (2015). Building an Intentional and Inclusive Civic Infrastructure. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building\\_an\\_intentional\\_and\\_inclusive\\_civic\\_infrastructure](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_an_intentional_and_inclusive_civic_infrastructure)





# Introduction

**The Collective Impact Forum, an initiative of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, has commissioned a research study** to provide insight and strategies for

how collective impact initiatives can contribute to policy, advocacy, and organizing efforts with a focus on building more equitable and antiracist systems. The Collective Impact Forum undertakes this project in 2020–2021 in response to the intersecting crises of the ongoing public health emergency, a prolonged economic downturn, and pervasive anti-Black racism, all of which highlight systemic inequities. The main audience for this research includes collective impact practitioners, funders, and the Collective Impact Forum itself.

In developing the research design, Frontline and staff from the Collective Impact Forum

(FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions) sought to understand how community organizing and advocacy are incorporated into collective impact efforts and whether incorporation of these strategy areas may facilitate greater progress towards results that advance equity and justice. Although there are a number of ways to improve collective impact's ability to achieve equitable outcomes and systems change, this research focuses on community organizing and advocacy. This report is designed to outline how these two strategies are currently utilized and how institutions can better leverage them to support collective impact efforts to realize equitable outcomes in communities.





# Background

The collective impact framework was born out of the intention to improve population outcomes through collaborative, scaled, and systemic changes. Articulated in a seminal article by FSG leaders John Kania and Mark Kramer, the five conditions of collective impact outlined patterns of successful social change methods that FSG observed in the field.<sup>2</sup> The collective impact framework quickly caught on, aided by an important partnership between FSG and the Aspen Institute, endorsements by the Obama Administration, and support from prominent voices in philanthropy.

Fostering the aligned action of leaders across sectors and industry, collective impact has been described as both a specific form of collaboration and a social movement. The framework has also drawn criticism for being top-down, prescriptive, and process-heavy.<sup>3,4</sup>

Although several early collective impact efforts were implemented with high fidelity to the framework, the majority of collective impact work is much more informal than the framework suggests. Today, the Collective Impact Forum network comprises collaborative efforts from around the globe, the majority of which are in the United States and Canada.

Even as collective impact has shown promise, many in the sector—including Kania and Kramer—have pointed to its limits in addressing racial inequity.<sup>5</sup> Several participants in this study observed that the five conditions of collective impact were not written with the principles of equity or justice in mind. These principles are largely absent from the original collective impact framework, and are at best treated as an “add on.” Participants recommended that issues of equity and justice should be fundamental to the approach.

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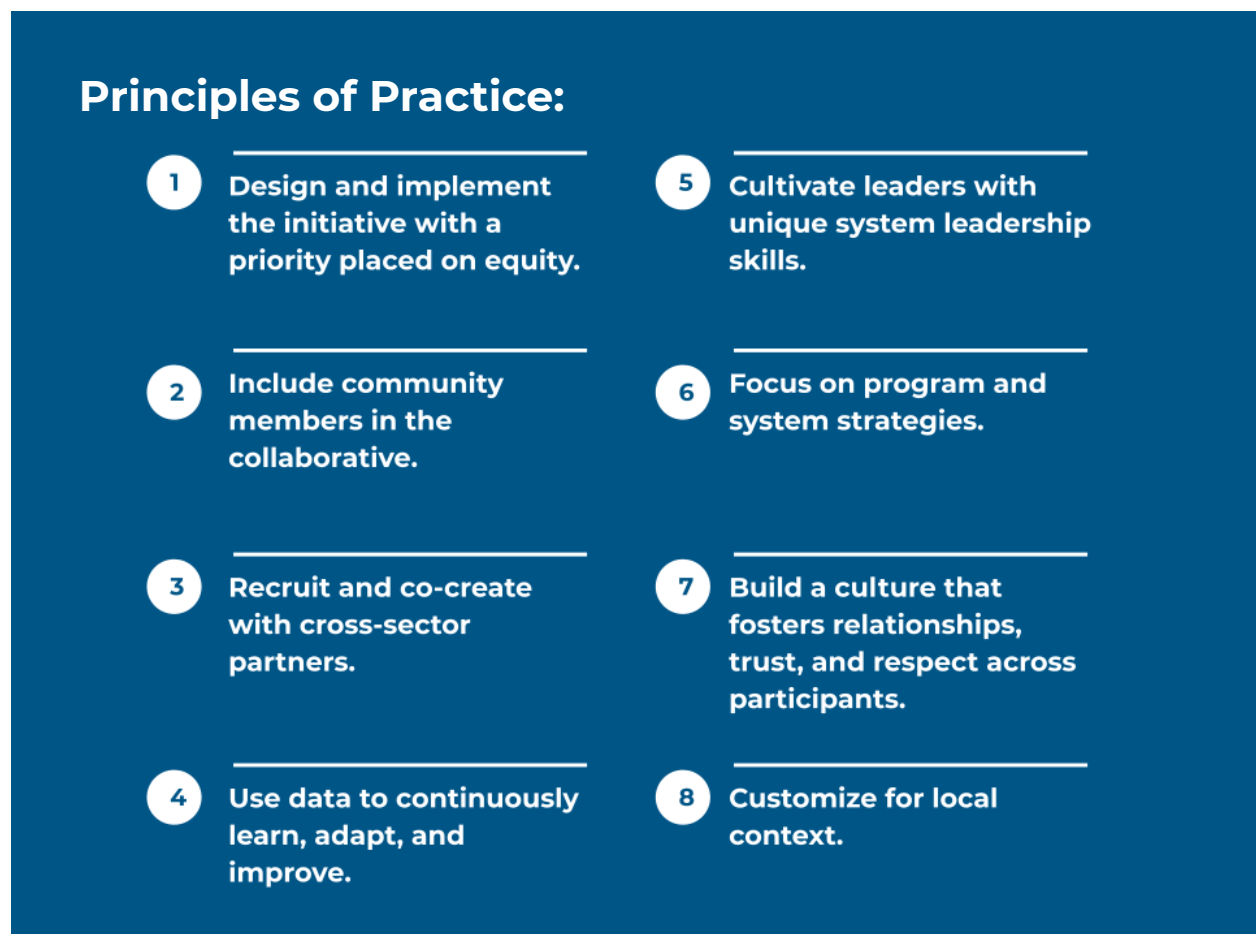
<sup>2</sup> Kania, J., and Kramer, M. (2011). Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact)

<sup>3</sup> Wolff, T. (2016). Voices from the Field: 10 Places Where Collective Impact Gets It Wrong. *Nonprofit Quarterly*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/voices-from-the-field-10-places-where-collective-impact-gets-it-wrong/>

<sup>4</sup> Boumgarden, P., and Branch, J. (2013). Collective Impact or Coordinated Blindness? *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact\\_or\\_coordinated\\_blindness](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact_or_coordinated_blindness)

<sup>5</sup> Kania, J., and Kramer, M. (2015). The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_equity\\_imperative\\_in\\_collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_equity_imperative_in_collective_impact)

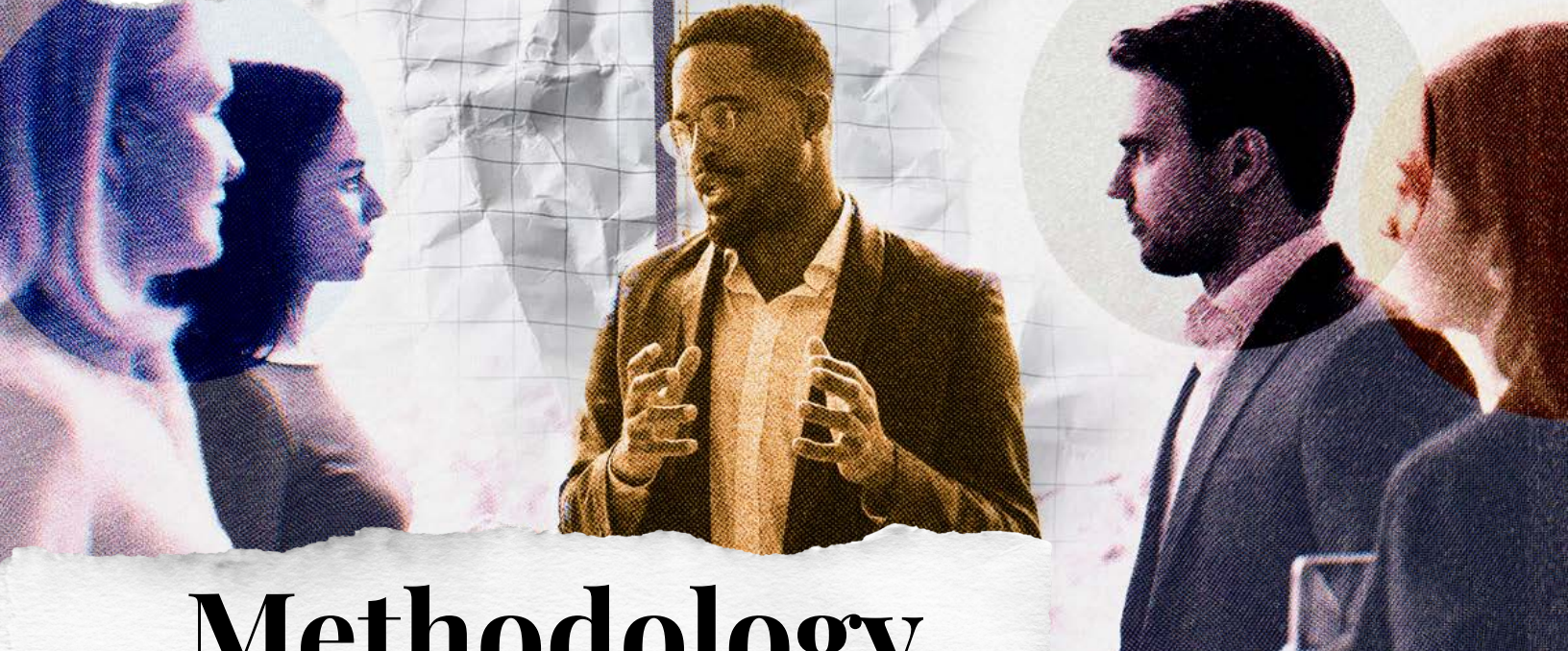
The Collective Impact Forum’s journey to confront the framework’s racial equity limitations began in 2015, sparked by a public challenge made by Angela Glover Blackwell at the Collective Impact Forum national conference. Glover Blackwell stated that, if a collective impact effort’s common agenda does not embrace the equity agenda, “you’re not going to have the right people working in the right way on what’s going on.”<sup>6</sup> The leadership of the Collective Impact Forum, FSG, and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions acknowledged that there may be equity limitations, and in the spirit of adaptation they set out to learn from the field and evolve the framework. This led to an expansion in the initial framing to incorporate a set of principles of practice, which include attention to equity and community engagement.



Given the current social and political context, leaders in the field are appropriately asking what role collective impact has in reconstructing systems for equity and justice. This research seeks to address this question by investigating how collective impact approaches can engage in advocacy, and particularly policy advocacy.

<sup>6</sup>Blackwell, A. G. (2015). Equity Matters in Collective Impact. Keynote address at the 2015 Collective Impact Convening. New Orleans, LA. <https://www.collectiveimpactforum.org/blogs/1/equity-matters-collective-impact>





# Methodology

## Data Inputs

This research included interviews with eight collective impact leaders and staff at backbone organizations, five philanthropic leaders, four subject matter experts, six staff members with FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, and two community organizers. For a full list of organizations and geographical regions represented, see Appendix A.

In addition to interviews, this research reflects a scan of peer-reviewed research and gray literature. For a full list of relevant literature, see Appendix C.

The research framework for this study was not designed to be exhaustive but rather representative. We limited our interviews to a convenience sample of participants who were able and willing to make themselves available for interviews. One limitation of this methodology is the difficulty of recruiting interviews from organizers and grassroots organizations. A majority of organizers we contacted declined to participate in the interview process. We do not have full insight into why so many declined to participate; however, we do

suspect that day-to-day pressures, combined with lack of familiarity and relationships with collective impact efforts, may have limited responsiveness to our request.

## Research Objectives

This research endeavor is in service of the following objectives:

- Examine to what extent grassroots, community organizing, and advocacy organizations are currently driving and contributing to collective impact initiatives.
- Ascertain how, and to what extent, collective impact disrupts and replaces traditional power structures. Examine how advocacy and organizing is incorporated into collective impact approaches.
- Understand how collective impact can contribute to policy, advocacy, and organizing efforts with a focus on building more equitable and antiracist systems.



## Definitions

This research was designed to explore how collective impact initiatives can contribute to policy, advocacy, and organizing efforts with a focus on building more equitable and antiracist systems as the nation begins to recover from COVID-19. For the purposes of this research, we are using the following definitions:

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**Advocacy**

An action that speaks in favor of, recommends, argues for, supports, or defends on behalf of a cause, community, or individual. Advocacy includes public education, regulatory work, litigation, and work before administrative bodies, lobbying, voter registration, voter education, and more. Advocacy efforts can be conducted by or on behalf of community members, with community members participating but not necessarily determining the work.

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**Antiracism**

The active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies, practices, and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.

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**Collective Impact**

The long-term commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors and the community to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem at scale.

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**Community**

A group of people who are linked by social ties, common perspectives, and/or shared geography.

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**Community Engagement**

Involvement of individuals or groups representing specific populations or geographies in a process or decision. Engagement can happen along a spectrum from informing to empowering.

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**Community Organizing**

A process by which individuals in a given community come together to act in common self-interest. Community organizing involves building the capacity of affected communities to acquire and exercise power through collective leadership, ownership, and/or participation in strategies.

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**Equity**

Just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential.<sup>7</sup> Equity in its fullest sense is intersectional and takes into account the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

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**Movement-building**

The process of organizing and helping to activate the will and capacity of people and organizations to work individually or collectively toward a shared vision. Movements require a strong pipeline of leaders, powerful grassroots support, cross-organizational partnerships, and a shared political goal.

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**Power**

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. In the context of social change work, it is helpful to understand the ways in which power operates, how different interests can be marginalised from decision-making, and the strategies needed to increase inclusion.

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**Structural Change**

Transformation in the structure of a society, including long-term changes in the structure and function of social institutions or the rules by which they are run.

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**System Change**

Shifting the conditions that hold a system in place, including policy, practices, power dynamics, and resource flows.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>PolicyLink (2018). The Equity Manifesto. [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl\\_sum15\\_manifesto\\_FINAL\\_2018.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/pl_sum15_manifesto_FINAL_2018.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>FSG. The Water of Systems Change. [https://www.fsg.org/publications/water\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change)





# Findings

## Community organizing and policy advocacy are critical but underutilized strategies for realizing equitable systems change.

While collective impact efforts utilize a variety of strategies, organizing and advocacy have proven to be tools necessary to create more equitable change. This research takes steps to better understand the advantages of community organizing and advocacy, the promising models for incorporating advocacy and organizing into collective impact, and the constraints to broader adoption.

Several interviewees noted that there is no intentional focus on community organizing in collective impact efforts. Others noted that, in cases where community organizing is incorporated into collective impact approaches, it is often valued only as a means to achieve specific goals and not as a tool to strengthen the capacity of organizations, coalitions, and communities to build community power and seek systems change.

For example, a community organizing partner may be engaged and funded to advance a local ballot initiative, but funding and engagement ends once the ballot measure is won or lost. As recent research from the USC Dornsife Equity Research Initiative asserts, investments in community organizing and power-building that are tied to narrow policy victories or short-term initiatives are unlikely to result in system changes if there are not also corresponding shifts in the capacity and power of the community to oversee implementation and hold accountability for equitable results. Community power-building is not just a way to achieve outcomes but is an outcome in and of itself.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Pastor, M., Ito, J., and Wander, M. (2020). A Primer on Community Power, Place, and Structural Change. USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute. [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/Primer\\_on\\_Structural\\_Change\\_web\\_lead\\_local.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/Primer_on_Structural_Change_web_lead_local.pdf).

Additionally, interviewees highlighted that partners in many initiatives do not have a baseline understanding of what community organizing actually is. One respondent shared that most collective impact partners “don’t think about organizing, but more so ‘community engagement.’” Jennifer Blatz, President and CEO of Strive Together, a national network supporting cradle-to-career initiatives, noted that the lack of a shared understanding of community organizing limits how effective organizing can be when incorporated into the collective impact process:

*“In the collective impact field, I see more talk about community engagement over advocacy and organizing. It’s important to call out that distinction and understand why it might be important to specifically invest in organizing.”*

This was a common reflection across respondents.

### **Incorporating principles of community organizing into collective impact**

Although community organizing is an important and necessary tool for advancing long-term systems change, organizing may not be the right strategy for every collective impact effort. Whether or not a coalition is prepared to support organizing efforts is influenced by capacity, resources, local politics, and a host of

other factors. However, collective impact efforts that incorporate core principles of organizing are likely to see more equitable outcomes and more likely to be positioned to make changes in the structures and systems that maintain inequities.

A study comparing collective impact initiatives and community organizing acknowledges similarities in orientation towards systems change and points to three distinct areas in which the approaches differ. Community organizing, but not necessarily collective impact, is marked by deep resident engagement, analysis of power, and capacity to address conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Our research uncovered that these three characteristics are significant indicators of the equity and inclusiveness of a collective impact initiative. Initiatives that demonstrated higher levels of equitable practices brought in professional facilitators to mitigate power dynamics between funders, organizations, and community members. They created space to unearth and work through tensions concerning strategy and theories of change, and they slowed down the process to allow for sufficient community engagement.

Kimberly Pham of Opportunity Youth United highlighted key practices of real, meaningful engagement:

*“You have to recognize that people have been disconnected. And so if we have the resources, we have to be inclusive.”*

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<sup>10</sup> Christens, B. D., and Inzeo, T. I. (2015). Widening the view: Situating collective impact among frameworks for community-led change. *Community Development* 46(4): 420–435. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15575330.2015.1061680>



*We have to not only invite people to the table, we have to ask what they need in order to work in this space. We have to design this space and process with community. And if you want to explore and learn about what's happening in a community, you have to be prepared to actually do something. What keeps people present and engaged isn't some small amount of funding, but the ability to see and understand that there is a larger movement and how issues are interconnected."*

Julio Marcial of Liberty Hill Foundation described the process of shifting power away from funders:

*"When you walk into a room, there's a clear dynamic of power: large organizations next to smaller ones, professional advocates, service providers who are often overlooked, and so on. We made the mistake of thinking we could facilitate this space given our relationships and histories with these different actors. But no funder should be facilitating these types of conversations. We came to the realization that we needed to bring in a professional facilitator to build the capacity to work effectively and facilitate in a way that's accessible to everyone."*

Kara Inae Carlisle of McKnight Foundation explained the benefits of embracing complexity and tension:

*"Oftentimes, tools like a 'shared agenda' are actually the funder's agenda. There has to be a shared analysis and a recognition of where that analysis diverges. Collective impact efforts should be able to identify and hold those tensions. Additionally, when creating things like shared measurements, [funder] assumptions must be made clear and disagreements should be lifted up. Collective impact efforts have to be rooted in trust and context."*

Facilitating processes in ways that actively seeks to redistribute power, engages residents, and makes space for conflict has value beyond creating efficient and effective partnerships. These strategies are critical components of developing trust and are necessary for scaling and addressing systems change.

Promise Partnership of Salt Lake provides an excellent example of how pursuing collective impact work without incorporating principles of organizing and building trust can limit the impact of good ideas and interventions.<sup>11</sup> In pursuit of ensuring school readiness and success for children in Utah, Promise Partnership identified eight priorities, including improving third-grade reading proficiency by addressing chronic absenteeism.

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<sup>11</sup> Strive Together (2020). Learning from Proof Point Communities: Promise Partnership of Salt Lake. [https://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/StriveTogether-Case-Study\\_PromisePartnership\\_Web.pdf](https://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/StriveTogether-Case-Study_PromisePartnership_Web.pdf)

Interventions varied by school but included hanging attendance posters in prominent places, providing rewards for attendance, setting up a mentorship program, and offering free doughnuts at school. Ultimately, these interventions had measurable improvements on student attendance.

Despite progress, Promise Partnership evaluators noted the difficulty of scaling these interventions at the district level. Although their work was made possible by forging strong relationships with teachers and school leadership, the Promise Partnership faced a different set of challenges when trying to embed the interventions into systems. District-level policies and practices made it challenging to create uniform policy change. Additionally, a lack of relationships with stakeholders throughout the district likely led to an insufficient number of advocates to push for system-level changes.

Although there is no guarantee that incorporating principles of community organizing would have produced different outcomes, more intentionally empowering parents and other stakeholders in the identification of interventions would have developed more advocates and increased the capacity of the community to push for systems change.

Fortunately, like most collective impact efforts, Promise Partnership of Salt Lake was intentional in measuring and evaluating progress. Although they were unable to

immediately leverage their micro-wins for system-level change, they are in a strong position to build the capacity of their stakeholders to push for long-term change. We believe incorporating principles of community organizing, at the onset, results in a more sustainable and collective advocacy effort.

## **Advocacy and collective impact**

In the larger social change field, the experience of the report authors is that there is a growing interest in policy advocacy as critical to pursuing systems change. Interviews with collective impact leaders revealed that advocacy is also being promoted as a core strategy in collective impact. Despite a general consensus on the importance of advocacy, our research found that it is still a nascent strategy that is incorporated inconsistently across initiatives. Considering the intention of collective impact efforts to create systems changes, this underutilization of advocacy presents a very real growth opportunity.

A source of hesitancy in using advocacy for collective impact is a perception by funders that advocacy is legally incompatible with an organization's financial structure. This, however, assumes a narrow understanding of what constitutes advocacy.<sup>12</sup> Foundations, non-profits, and other tax-exempt entities should be cognizant of their limitations in engaging in IRS-defined lobbying. However, advocacy includes a wide range of activities that fall outside of the scope of lobbying.

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<sup>12</sup> While the term “advocacy” is often used synonymously and interchangeably with “lobbying,” it is important to distinguish between the two. Lobbying is defined by the Internal Revenue Service as either “direct” or “grassroots” and is considered to be communications with a policy maker, government employee, or the general public that seeks to influence specific policy or legislation. The Internal Revenue Service further defines “political activities” and “legislative activities,” both of which have separate rules as it pertains to tax-exempt organizations. <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/lobbying>



Although many tactics are legal, some funders and organizations consider advocacy to be partisan in nature and are fearful of potential political backlash.

A 2011 study surveying nearly 1,500 advocacy organizations found that 26.9% of respondents felt the perception of legal limitations on allowable advocacy activities significantly contributed to a decrease in the scope of advocacy activities.<sup>13</sup> In other words, more than a quarter of organizations limited advocacy—despite its legality—because of the mere perception that it could constitute impermissible lobbying. While attitudes towards advocacy have certainly shifted over the past decade, we believe it is still largely misunderstood and inconsistently incorporated.

Interviewees noted that funders' inability to support certain types of advocacy work is a significant barrier to using these tools in collective impact efforts. One study found that, while support for policy advocacy was high among foundation boards and leadership, investments remained low.<sup>14</sup> Several national institutions such as Urban Institute and the Council of Foundations have made efforts to

demystify the funding of policy advocacy. Research suggests that, for foundations to adequately invest in policy advocacy, they must build institutional knowledge so that leadership and program officers understand how to invest in and measure the impact of advocacy.<sup>15</sup>

When we consider that equitable collective impact work necessitates boldly opposing inequitable systems, the need for a community organizing and advocacy strategy becomes apparent. Community organizing inherently requires a level of autonomy and independence from traditional power structures.<sup>16</sup> Any collective impact effort that is unwilling to challenge these power structures is incapable of real equitable systems change. Conversely, collective impact efforts that consistently use organizing and advocacy to manage power and tension are best situated to making systemic impact. Although community organizing looks different depending on place and context, the core tenets of community organizing are prerequisites for an equitable collective impact implementation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Silverman, R. M., and Patterson, K. L. (2011). The effects of perceived funding trends on non-profit advocacy: A national survey of non-profit advocacy organizations in the United States. *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 24(5):435–451. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235277620> The effects of perceived funding trends on non-profit advocacy A national survey of non-profit advocacy organizations in the United States

<sup>14</sup> Orensten, N., Buteau, E., Martin, H., and Gehling, K. (2020). Policy Influence: What Foundations Are Doing and Why. The Center for Effective Philanthropy. [http://cep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CEP\\_PublicPolicy.pdf](http://cep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CEP_PublicPolicy.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Margolis, D., & Ersoylu, L. (2015). How to Implement a Funder-Supported Advocacy Effort and the Integral Role of Policy Consultants. *The Foundation Review* 7(1). <http://nncg.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/How-to-Implement-a-Funder-Supported-Advocacy-Effort-and-the-Integ.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Wolff, T., et al. (2016). Collaborating for Equity and Justice: Moving Beyond Collective Impact. *Nonprofit Quarterly*. <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/collaborating-equity-justice-moving-beyond-collective-impact/>

<sup>17</sup> Change Elemental. (2020). Essential Capacities for Equitable Communities. [https://changeelemental.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EssentialCapacitiesforCommunityPower\\_ChangeElemental.pdf](https://changeelemental.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EssentialCapacitiesforCommunityPower_ChangeElemental.pdf)

## Partners must address and disrupt both internal and broader political power dynamics in order for collective impact to lead to equitable changes in systems and structures.

Collective impact offers a means to intervene and change systems to improve population outcomes. The framework has largely leaned on the ability of community, organizational, and institutional leaders to exercise their individual and collective power and expertise.

One interviewee suggested that collective impact allows for “substantial shifts in some communities, but only makes marginal changes in others.” This is partially due to the fact that the approach facilitates collaboration, but does not necessarily build motivation for change. As another participant noted, “collective impact serves as a shared decision-making format, but only allows for decisions that partners are already ready for.” As a part of the engagement process, backbone organizations or any institution playing a leadership role should be open and honest about its own relationship to power and any limitations or barriers that may create. Actively seeking partnerships and relationships that can support power redistribution is critical.

Although our interviews did not uncover examples of deep and sustained power shifts, we did find that many collective impact efforts have led to substantial improvements in administrative policy or procedure, demonstrating the importance of shared decision-making in order to change systems. For example, the Strive Together network has seen ballot and legislative wins in the past year that include: the passage of a measure that will provide early childhood education to all 3- and 4-year olds in Multnomah County, Oregon; a sales tax renewal in San Antonio, Texas, that will extend full-day pre-k to thousands of children; and the closure of a tax loophole that will support Colorado’s education budget and affordable housing.<sup>18, 19, 20</sup>

Focusing efforts at making changes to “government” rather than “governance” is typical. Traditional foundation-funded strategies are usually about winning government priorities and policies. We are challenging the field to think beyond policy wins and to consider changes in the broader institutional and community contexts that facilitate conditions for an equitable society.<sup>21</sup>

Despite these significant wins, few result in permanent changes to those inherently inequitable systems. Without intentionally disrupting how power is distributed—both on a societal level and within the practice of collective impact itself—efforts to marginally reform structures still allow inequities to exist.

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<sup>18</sup> All Hands Raised. <https://allhandsraised.org/>

<sup>19</sup> Up Partnership. <https://uppartnership.org/>

<sup>20</sup> Rocky Mountain Partnership. <https://rmpartnership.org/>

<sup>21</sup> Pastor, M., Ito, J., and Wander, M. (2020). Story of Place: Community Power and Healthy Communities. USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute. [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/LEAD\\_LOCAL\\_Story\\_of\\_Place\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/LEAD_LOCAL_Story_of_Place_web.pdf)



Former collective impact initiative leader Mary Jean Ryan sums it up well in her 2014 article for Stanford Social Innovation Review:

*“In each community, a particular array of power holds the present system structures in place and accounts for present-day outcomes. Generally, the status quo has been built over a long period of time by the actions of many. The central actors are often unaware of the full extent of their complicity in any negative outcomes, or of how their roles and actions reinforce those of others.”<sup>22</sup>*

In order for collective impact efforts to achieve just and equitable population outcomes, both the process and product of the effort must contribute to the redistribution of power and resources.

### **Facilitating the redistribution of power through collective impact**

Collective impact partners, coalitions, and networks must have intentional conversations about race, gender, and systemic oppression. Although these conversations are insufficient on their own, they can partially compensate for the absence of a critical race/gender lens in the collective impact principles. These discussions should lead to a deeper interrogation of how power influences decisions about strategies and objectives.

Partners should understand relationship-building as a way to strengthen a

community’s power infrastructure. This means increasing resources available to community members for power-building, building, and drawing from community-based expertise and experiences, strengthening the relationships between stakeholders, government agencies, elected officials, and others, and clarifying the connection between decision-making tables, decision-makers, and grassroots leaders.<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, a collective impact effort that is inclusive of a multitude of identities, experiences, and cultures has the opportunity to redistribute power in meaningful ways. Developing broad and deep relationships among public leaders, funders, and community members is necessary for an equitable distribution of power.

### **“Outsider” approaches that are endemic to community organizing should not be sacrificed in favor of “insider” strategies**

One review of large-scale collective impact initiatives suggests that community organizing and advocacy are largely absent because programmatic solutions are construed as system interventions. Within these interventions, there is often a reliance on the will of system leaders and an aversion to conflict and disruptive change.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ryan, M. J. (2014). Power Dynamics in Collective Impact. Stanford Social Innovation Review. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/power\\_dynamics\\_in\\_collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/power_dynamics_in_collective_impact)

<sup>23</sup> Pastor, M., Ito, J., and Wander, M. (2020). Story of Place: Community Power and Healthy Communities. USC Dornsife Equity Research Institute. [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/LEAD\\_LOCAL\\_Story\\_of\\_Place\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/1411/docs/LEAD_LOCAL_Story_of_Place_web.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Michaud-Létourneau, I., Gayard, M., Mathisen, R., Thi Hong Phan, L., Weissman, A., and Pelletier, D. L. (2019). Enhancing governance and strengthening advocacy for policy change of large Collective Impact initiatives. Maternal and Child Nutrition. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/mcn.12728>

Several interviews from our study echoed these findings. Interviewees described the inherent tensions between institutions employing an “insider” strategy by working to build relationships with system leaders and those using an “outsider” strategy by exerting external and public pressure.

This division goes beyond differing theories of change. In practice, which actors employ insider versus outsider strategies is largely associated with whether or not they have access to power.

The very nature of philanthropy and centralized funding creates an imbalance in how insider and outsider strategies are considered. Funders have a disproportionately large impact on the types of strategies used in collective impact efforts. Our research found that many funders are fearful of engaging in outsider strategies such as community organizing and advocacy. In particular, the local and regional funders that often support smaller organizations tend to be conservative in the type of tactics they are willing to fund.<sup>25</sup> This impacts a grantee’s relation to power and the strategies that it chooses to employ. Practitioners interviewed asserted that their strategies were a reflection of what types of activities funders were comfortable supporting. Funders, in turn, cited constraints in their ability to fund direct advocacy or work that may be perceived as partisan.

Many local funders also have existing relationships with institutional power holders

who are the target of outside pressure campaigns. Funding institutions are often hesitant to publicly criticize individuals or public institutions who they deem valuable or important. Additionally, there are often differences between how funders and community members define success for an endeavor. Community organizing requires base-building, which often spans multiple issues and takes time. Most funders measure the impact of an investment within a relatively short timeline and a specific issue area.

Although power relations do not create an insurmountable obstacle to equitable practices, failure to acknowledge and examine tensions can pose a major barrier. Smaller organizations and partners often do not feel that they are in a position to push back or critique insider strategies. In many collective impact efforts, tensions largely remain unsurfaced and unresolved. Rather than creating time and space to work through points of tension, partners emphasize building consensus. As a result, strategies largely default to the preferences of more powerful partners, who are often system leaders or funding organizations.

Strong collective impact efforts not only understand the power dynamics associated with particular strategies but intentionally employ an inside-outside strategy. Being thoughtful in how different partners can employ insider and outsider strategies in support of one another is key to an equitable and sustainable effort.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Barge, B., et. al. (2020). Black Funding Denied: Community Foundations Underinvesting in Black Communities. National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

<https://www.ncrp.org/news/ncrp-report-too-many-local-community-foundations-still-underinvesting-in-black-communities>

<sup>26</sup> Heller, J. (2015). Using an Inside-Outside Strategy to Build Power and Advance Equity. Human Impact Partners. <https://humanimpact.org/using-an-inside-outside-strategy-to-build-power-and-advance-equity/>





# Recommendations

Our research underscored a core tenet of collective impact: that no two communities or issues are alike. Unique factors such as the political environment, history of movement-work, and capacity of the local nonprofit, advocacy, and philanthropic communities all influence how partnerships develop and how coalitions work together. An equitable and effective collective impact approach must consider these factors and develop in an intentional manner that is responsive to emerging needs. Regardless of the differences between communities, this research uncovered three ways in which collective impact can make equitable, system-level impact:

- Incorporate the values and principles of community organizing
- Create the conditions necessary to engage in advocacy
- Build relationships and trust, particularly with grassroots and community-based organizations.

## **Incorporate the values and principles of community organizing**

### **Democratize the early design process.**

When asked about opportunities to prioritize equity as a value in collective impact initiatives, many practitioners pointed to the earliest stages of a collective impact effort. It is important to intentionally select and engage stakeholders in the framework design process. This centers the voices of impacted communities and prevents efforts from being top-down and transactional. Although there are opportunities to engage a wide range of stakeholders throughout the collective impact process, doing so early and often sets the stage for greater inclusivity.

**Understand the limitations of any collective impact initiative.** Although community organizing is a necessary component of any sustainable social change effort, not all collective impact initiatives have the capacity to immediately and fully adopt a community organizing strategy. Collective impact leaders should strive to name and own the limitations of any particular project, practicing radical honesty and humility. This allows partners to set goals, seek resources, and grow the competencies necessary to support community organizing.

**Engage professional facilitators to mitigate power imbalances.** Power imbalances exist in any coalition configuration. Whether one partner has more resources, longer tenure, or more political connections, it is important to recognize imbalances and intentionally ensure that they don't interfere with collective action and decision-making. Mitigating power imbalances is not only a strategic necessity; it is imperative for equitable partnerships. Power is often overly distributed to institutions that are white- and/or male-led. Utilizing an outside facilitator is an important step in ensuring that all partners are able to fully engage in equitable co-design and collective decision-making processes.

## Create the conditions necessary to be able to engage in advocacy

**Engage in advocacy as a way to create a stronger civic infrastructure.** Advocacy is more than a tactic: it provides a framework for understanding

issues and evaluating change. Stephen Patrick and Sheri Brady describe civic infrastructure as “the places, policies, programs, and practices that enable us to connect with each other, define and address shared concerns, build community, and solve public problems.”<sup>27</sup> Intentionally engaging in advocacy strategies not only furthers the specific issue at hand; it also supports communities to build strong local civic infrastructure.

**Be strategic about deciding when to engage public officials.** In many collective impact efforts, engaging local elected officials is an important way to cultivate powerful champions and ensure buy-in from key decision-makers. While engaging powerful institutional players early on is an effective strategy, it comes at a cost.

First, the inclusion of public officials introduces a major power imbalance. Elected officials are, by definition, in positions of power. Collective impact leaders that choose to include public officials in the early design phase of an initiative must be intentional in reducing the impact of that imbalance.

Secondly, including public officials can influence the scope of possible solutions and interventions, even before community members are able to engage in the process. Elected officials face competing priorities and often limit solutions to what they believe can be realistically completed before the next election. Limiting potential interventions can discourage the participation of diverse stakeholders or community members.

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<sup>27</sup> Patrick, S. & Brady, S. (2015). Building an Intentional and Inclusive Civic Infrastructure. Stanford Social Innovation Review. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building\\_an\\_intentional\\_and\\_inclusive\\_civic\\_infrastructure#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/building_an_intentional_and_inclusive_civic_infrastructure#)



Lastly, including public officials can discourage many of the advocacy tools that are central to community-based and grassroots organizations. For example, partners who often use litigation or petitions may choose not to participate in a collective impact effort if they believe strategic direction rests in the hands of elected officials. In order to reap the benefits of both inside and outside advocacy tactics, collective impact initiatives should consider these trade-offs.

## **Build relationships and trust, particularly with grassroots and community-based organizations.**

**Build a culture of transparency and collective decision-making.** Given that there are inherent power imbalances when bringing community, funders, and policymakers together, it is critical that collective impact efforts practice radical transparency. Community members and partners need assurance that larger, more established, or better-funded partners are willing to listen and work in partnership. Good intentions and personal relationships are insufficient. Collective impact partners should be proudly transparent about the inclusiveness of their processes.

**Prioritize trust-building early and often.** Trust underlies the ability of partners to show up and engage as their true, authentic selves. Building trust is a complex, ongoing process. New collective impact efforts should consider trust-building to be a critical activity. Of the Whitman Institute's six key principles of trust-based philanthropy,<sup>28</sup> three are particularly relevant to new collective impact efforts: do the homework, be transparent and responsive, and solicit and act on feedback.

**Create metrics for evaluating relationship-building.** Building and maintaining strong relationships is just as important as any other activity in an equity-centered collective impact initiative. Just as a coalition would identify metrics and benchmarks to evaluate progress, collective impact efforts should track relationship-building among partners and communities. Examples of relationship metrics include longitudinal participation in community surveys and forums, growth of community familiarity with collective impact efforts over time, and creation of opportunities for individual organizations to evaluate themselves and their partners.

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<sup>28</sup> The Whitman Institute. (2020). Trust-Based Philanthropy. <https://thewhitmaninstitute.org/about/trust-based-philanthropy/>



# Conclusion

In an effort to understand how community organizing and advocacy can drive more equitable outcomes, this research found that no two collective impact efforts are alike. The specific ways in which backbone organizations, funders, and stakeholders engage in work is unique to issue area, geography, local politics, and a wide range of other factors. Despite these differences, we believe that, by being intentional about incorporating principles and practices from community organizing and advocacy, collective impact efforts will result in more equitable and longer-lasting change.

While no set of recommendations are applicable to every collective impact effort, backbone organizations, funders, and leadership can use the following questions to reflect on how our recommendations may apply to their work.

## **Who are the organizers and advocates, and how are they involved in decision-making?**

- Which stakeholders are absent, and why?
- Are organizers and advocates engaged in the design phase?
- Where does decision-making power ultimately rest?

## **What tensions (historical and contemporary) exist among stakeholders and partners?**

- Do any partners have relevant histories that impact relationships?
- Are there inherent tensions in the mission and goals of partners?
- What type of relationship does the backbone organization have with potential partners and stakeholders?
- Is the backbone organization representative of the communities served? When might it be helpful to engage an outside facilitator to mitigate power imbalances?

## **Who will carry this work forward in the long term?**

- Who are the individuals and organizations that have worked on this issue in the past? How are they engaged?
- Once the initial goals and objectives are achieved, who will “own” this work? Are they engaged as equal partner.



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## About Frontline Solutions

Frontline Solutions is a Black-owned and Black-led consulting firm that helps organizations to plan, innovate, learn and transform. Over the past 16 years, we've partnered with some of the country's largest foundations, offering strategic and business planning, research, evaluation, technical assistance, and community engagement. With headquarters in Washington, DC and Durham, NC, our national team of 30 consultants comprises strategists, scholars, activists, coaches, advocates, and artists with decades of experience in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. They have led organizations, canvassed neighborhoods, and designed solutions ranging from grantmaking to public policy. We draw on our multifaceted perspectives and lived experiences to engage with clients in the journey toward bold, expansive visions for their work and for themselves.

Over the last decade, by leveraging cutting-edge scholarship alongside the experiences of grassroots practitioners and philanthropists, we've become a central force in shaping strategies and cross-movement building to align sector-wide work for the greater prosperity of BIPOC and low-income communities. Through our scholarship, advocacy, and efforts to elevate public discourse, we've served as healthy interrogators and disruptors of the status quo, especially regarding how philanthropy and the nonprofit sector can most effectively address gross inequities in the U.S. We pride ourselves on being both participants in these sectors and students in their growth and evolution.



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# Appendix A

Below is a list of organizations that participated in interviews for our research. This list does not include organizations or individuals who declined to participate or requested to not be named in this report.

## Organizations

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Bay Area Community Resources

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Boston Opportunity Agenda

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Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership

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MINDPOP (Austin, TX)

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United Way of Greater Los Angeles

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Liberty Hill Foundation (Los Angeles)

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Opportunity Youth United

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Movement Matters (Washington, DC)

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Strive Together

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Coalition Building for Healthy Communities

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Tamarack Institute

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Conrad N. Hilton Foundation

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Ballmer Foundation

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McKnight Foundation

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Blue Meridian Partners

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Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo

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Federal Reserve Bank of Boston

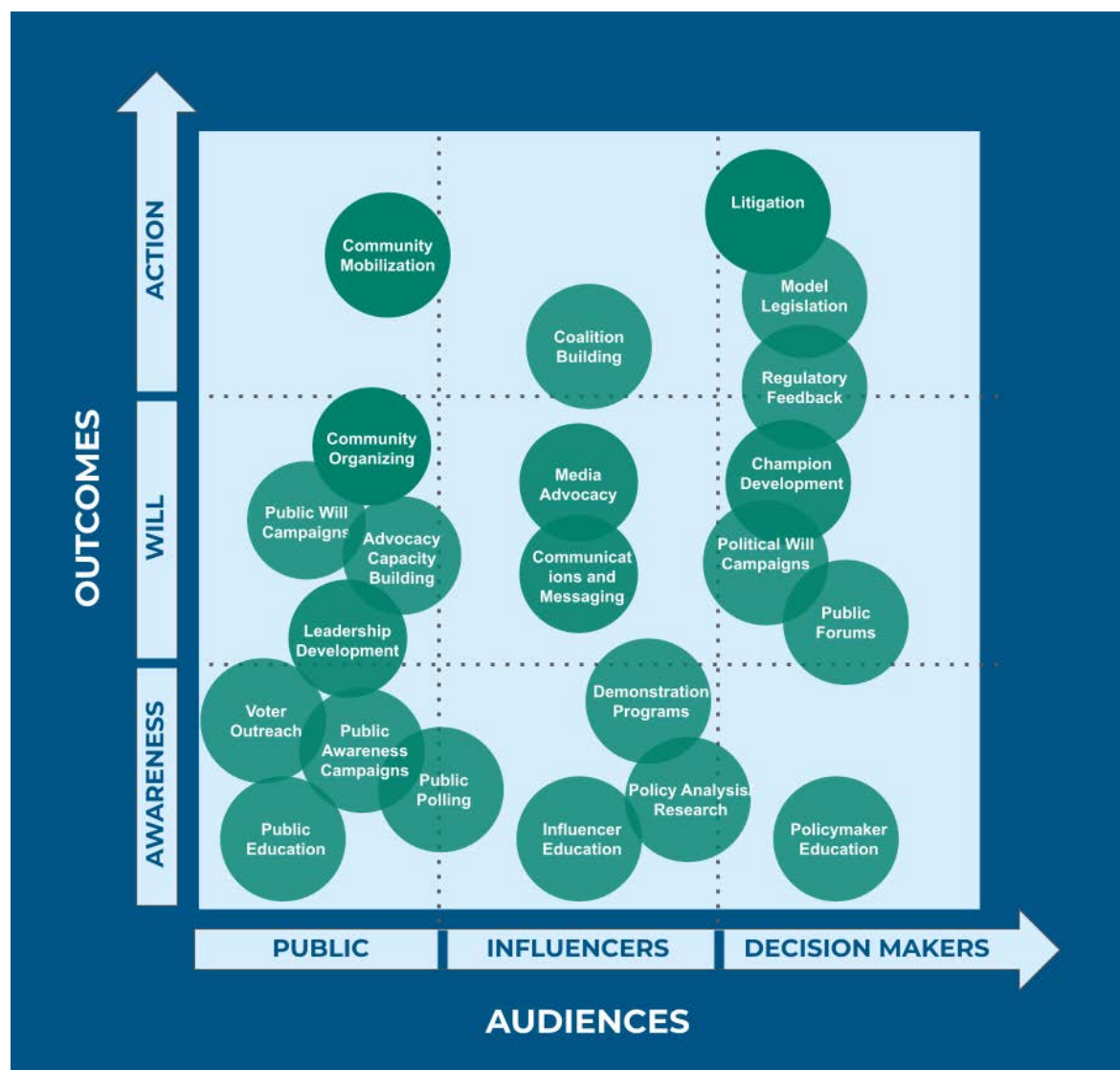
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Staff, advisors, and board of FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for  
Community Solutions

# Appendix B

## The Advocacy Strategy Framework

Developed by the Center for Evaluation Innovation, the Advocacy Strategy Framework is a tool that helps advocates to consider what actions and strategies best align with a particular audience or desired outcome.<sup>29</sup>



<sup>28</sup> Coffman, J., and Beer, T. (2015). The Advocacy Strategy Framework. Center for Evaluation Innovation. <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Advocacy-Strategy-Framework.pdf>



# Appendix C

## Literature Scan

This research relied on peer-reviewed academic research as well as gray literature from non-profits, foundations, and other content experts.

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