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Collective Impact in Rural Places

Sarah J. Zuckerman

Complex social problems such as teen pregnancy, youth suicide, student achievement, and foster care placement result from the interplay of problems in both the public and private sectors. Isolated approaches by single organizations in individual sectors, in general, have failed to “move the needle” on many of these problems. Such “wicked” problems are defined by complexity, interrelatedness, unpredictability, open-ended, intractable, and often subjected to competing values (Head & Alford, 2015). As such, wicked problems do not respond to technical, ready-made solutions. Instead, they require adaptive and iterative approaches to learning about the causes of complex challenges, generating solutions, measuring the impact, and using knowledge generated to revise solutions (Edmondson & Zimpher, 2014; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Rural communities are not immune from such problems. For example, research suggests rural youth are more likely to die by suicide than their urban peers (Fontanella et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2013) and young women aged fifteen to twenty-four in rural places are more likely than their urban peers to experience unplanned pregnancies (Sutton et al., 2019).

Place-based, cross-sector partnerships have increasingly been seen as a strategy for tackling these types of complex social problems by bringing together local assets and drawing on strengths such as local knowledge, local leadership, and social networks to support children and families (Boyd et al., 2008; Henig et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2014). By identifying local challenges and focusing on local assets, these partnerships seek to avoid the short-termism of shifting national priorities and policy churn, as well as policy solutions crafted by “distant experts” (Jennings, 1999; Kerr et al., 2014; Stone et al., 2001). For place-based cross-sector partnerships to be effective, they must be “*fit for purpose, in this place, at this time*” (Lawson, 2013, p. 614, emphasis original). They must also be “locally developed interventions that engage with an ecological understanding of place” (Kerr et al., 2014, p. 131). This ecological understanding of place includes local demographics, organizational environments, and social geography (Lawson et al., 2014). When partnerships fulfill these recommendations, they have the potential to be asset- and place-based interventions for complex social challenges.

Collective Impact

Collective impact, a set of conditions for effective partnerships (Kania & Kramer, 2011), has risen in prominence as a guide for communities seeking to address wicked problems through partnership efforts. Collective impact efforts join other place-based community partnership models such as the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City and the federal Promise Neighborhood grant program designed to replicate the success of wrap-around services for children and families in addressing the complexities of youth development (Horsford & Sampson, 2014; Miller et al., 2017). Simply defined, collective impact is "the long term commitments of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda to solve a specific social problem" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39). Collective impact provides processes to collaboratively develop flexible and adaptive cross-sector approaches to solving wicked problems (Kania & Kramer, 2011; 2013). This work requires new ways of collaboration among partner organizations to accelerate learning about approaches that do and do not work. Collective impact offers a means to braid public and private funding in order to leverage scarce resources, and it shifts the task of problem-solving to those closest to the problems by putting into place five conditions that set it apart from other cross-sector partnerships:

- *A common agenda*: Stakeholders develop a shared understanding of the problem, a common vision for the future, and an agreed-upon approach to change. This requires stakeholders to engage in dialogue, often under the guidance and facilitation of a trained convener.
- *Shared measurement systems*: In order to measure progress toward a collective vision, shared metrics and common data are needed, along with transparent discussions of data both within the collective impact effort and with the public.
- *Mutually reinforcing activities*: Collective impact efforts depend on organizations coordinating their activities with each stakeholder understanding their role in advancing the common agenda.
- *Continuous communication*: Dialogue among stakeholders over time supports the development of trust and a common language, and is supplemented by regular written communications.
- *Backbone organization*: A designated organization provides staff and resources to coordinate the work. (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

Of these conditions, the backbone organization most differentiates collective impact efforts from other types of collaborations. Existing entities such as the United Way or a local philanthropic foundation can serve as a backbone organization (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Zuckerman, 2016a). Communities may opt to form a nonprofit organization to serve as the backbone. Backbone organization staff provide strategic leadership, facilitate conversation among members, manage and analyze data, engage in communication, direct community outreach, and bring together funding streams. Providing these functions allows partners to focus on problem-solving (Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). This work requires funding, one

of the most challenging aspects of creating collective impact, as funders are often reluctant to support infrastructure in favor of grants for narrowly defined issues and specific outcomes (Mann, 2014). However, even a modest budget for a backbone organization can amplify the funds of partner organizations by increasing their impact. Backbone funding supports full-time staff, typically called *conveners*, whose job it is to bring together stakeholders, maintain their engagement, and facilitate dialogue. Conveners need special skills and capacities, particularly the social skills to bring stakeholders to the table and keep them there. Conveners should be skilled in focusing people's attention, using structured discussion processes, framing issues, and mediating conflict.

Although collective impact holds potential for rural communities as a place-based intervention for complex social challenges, many collective impact efforts and organizations touting their success are found in urban areas (Henig et al., 2016). The result is a set of codified design elements successful in one context and considered applicable in a variety of settings, including rural areas. Yet, rural communities have different strengths and needs that must be considered to create partnerships fit for purpose and place that are capable of supporting community development (Lawson, 2013; Zuckerman, 2016a). This requires attention to the relational and identity needs of human development, rather than serving only individual needs, further contributing to the disembedding of rural youth for the global economy (Casto, McGrath et al., 2016; Corbett, 2007).

To better understand the potential of collective impact for rural communities, this chapter draws from the general research on collective impact as well as two case studies conducted in rural communities to describe the development of partnerships in communities with low population density. These two case studies describe two rural collective impact efforts that include schools and focus on outcomes for children and youth: the Grand Isle Network and the Northeast Prairie Coalition. Each of these partnerships is located in a small community between 10,000–25,000 residents that serve as employment, service, and leisure hubs for larger rural regions dependent on traditionally rural industries, including agriculture, mining, and forestry, as well as newer industries of tourism and manufacturing. Both partnerships sought to tackle alarming social problems in their rural communities and in the surrounding areas. In Grand Isle, the Network initially sought to tackle low academic performance, but a rash of youth suicides shifted the focus of the group to strengthening relationships with youth and increasing their connections to the community. In Northeast Prairie, the initial problem identified was keeping children out of the child protective services system by reducing incidence of abuse and neglect. To do this, the Coalition works to meet the basic needs of families, to support youth as they transition to adulthood, and to increase quality and quantity of early childhood care and education in the community. Additional information about each case follows.

Cases

Grand Isle Network

The Grand Isle Network¹ is centered in a micropolitan² area of approximately 10,000 residents in a nonmetropolitan county³ located in a primarily rural region of a Midwest State. It serves eight

constituent school districts in three counties generally understood by residents as the “greater Grand Isle area.” These districts included are classified as town remote, rural fringe, rural distant, and rural remote by the US Census Bureau.⁴ Industry in the area has historically been mining, agriculture, and paper milling, all of which have been in decline. Service and tourism jobs have been on the rise, leaving community members worried about low wages and the lack of steady, year-round work. The Network was formed in 2009, with the support of the Grand Isle Foundation, a private philanthropic foundation that served as the initial backbone organization.

The Foundation employed two full-time conveners at the time of the study, and additional staff provided support with tasks such as communication strategies. The backbone organization planned and facilitated meetings and events for the Network, took on logistical tasks, and was responsible for moving the group forward. For example, one of the two conveners of the Grand Isle Network described her role as “a cat-herder, someone who is going to make sure this moves forward every day, somebody who wakes up worrying about this and next steps.” Throughout, members of the Network talked about the importance of the two conveners in pushing the work forward through ongoing communication and outreach, as well as by using specific strategies to facilitate dialogue,⁵ regroup and reframe ideas, and develop consensus. The Foundation supported this work through resources and capacity building in terms of training the conveners. With over fifty years of philanthropy serving the region and rural communities across the state, the Grand Isle Foundation has developed a high level of capacity, leadership, resources, and legitimacy in the local community and across the state (Zuckerman, 2016a), making it a unique asset unavailable to many rural communities.

In addition to the unique asset of the Foundation, the Network built on previous long-term collaborative efforts, including one in the area of early childhood begun in the 1990s and a partnership between the K-12 schools and the local community college that has lasted twenty-five years. The Network initially sought to improve educational outcomes but has evolved to focus on social-emotional development in the wake of a rash of youth deaths by suicide and attempts. In 2015, the Network released baseline data, developed a smaller leadership table, and began engaging in efforts aligned to their vision at the school level. These efforts primarily focused on the engagement of youths inside and outside of school and notably were cocreated with youths at a number of schools (Zuckerman, 2016a; Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018).

Northeast Prairie Coalition

The Northeast Prairie Coalition is located in a Midwest State in a micropolitan community of approximately 25,000 people that is defined as town remote by the US Census and serves as a retail and employment hub for the surrounding agricultural communities. While the Coalition started in Northeast Prairie, it has grown to serve other communities in the county and region, including those identified as town distant and rural remote. The county where the Coalition is located has a low median income, despite low unemployment numbers, and has the highest level of income inequality in the state.

The group began with conversations among a core group of community leaders around 2011. The development of the Coalition has been supported by a statewide nonprofit organization that has provided startup funds, including the salaries for a convener and a part-time consultant, and backbone functions such as data collection. This nonprofit organization supports a number of rural and urban collective impact efforts across the state that focus on reducing child welfare

system contact. According to the consultant, this organization's interest in supporting collective impact efforts across the state was due to challenges in obtaining federal and other grant funding for child abuse and neglect prevention due to the small-sized rural communities. By bringing together partners in these communities in collective impact efforts, the nonprofit hoped to increase funding and create more sustainable programs. An executive at this organization described their role as "the backbone to the backbone organizations," and the convener and consultant described their efforts to create a community of practice of collective impact leaders across the state.

The local United Way of Northeast Prairie served as the fiscal agent, conducting all of the accounting and grant management for the Coalition; it also donated office space for the convener and other staff. In 2017, the Coalition applied for 501(C)3 status to create a new backbone organization, and in 2018, the Coalition hired additional staff to provide support. Coalition members reported that hiring the current convener was a key ingredient in their success. Growing up in a nearby rural community as a bilingual daughter of an immigrant and professional experience in health care and early childhood care and education provided her with a unique background for her role as convener. Additionally, members praised her for her people skills, her ability to "dream big" and as a "facilitative" leader who empowered others to take on leadership (Zuckerman, 2020a). The Coalition has three focus areas: helping families meet basic needs of housing, food, and clothing to prevent entry into the child welfare system; increasing the quantity and quality of early childhood care and education; and supporting healthy transitions to adulthood, including preventing homelessness among youth and entry into the juvenile justice system.

Preconditions for Successful Collaboration

In addition to the five conditions listed above, three preconditions till the soil for the seeds of collective impact to grow into successful collaboration. The first precondition is an influential champion, or champions, with the credibility to bring together community leaders. Such champions must be passionate about the issue but recognize the need to let stakeholders develop the solution, rather than bringing a preconceived agenda to the table (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). These champions may be inside the schools or in other organizations. In Grand Isle, the Network had champions at multiple levels and across multiple organizations, including school leaders. One superintendent, in particular, served as a champion through his public outreach, which included publishing blog posts and speaking at public events. As a member of previous collaborative efforts, he provided confidence in the process. In addition to his public-facing role as champion across the region, he also pursued the Network's goals in his own district, including early childhood programs and creating an afterschool program (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2020b). Other school-based champions included an afterschool program director who likewise served as a public face of the collective impact effort, issuing an impassioned call to arms at a public event. Champions outside of the schools included backbone organization staff who shared the original collective impact article with colleagues, which was described by one as "putting language to what we had already been doing." Backbone organization members also championed collective impact in their work with community members. Their history of positive work in the community, bolstered by recent efforts to increase transparency, provided legitimacy to their collective impact effort.

In the Northeast Prairie Coalition, members of the initial steering committee served as champions. Although the local superintendent was described as being on board, these champions

served in social service agencies outside of the education system. One was a member of the regional Department of Health and Human Services office who saw the need to reduce child protective cases and brought the idea of collective impact to a group of healthcare and mental healthcare professionals. They also put the initial steering committee in contact with another collective impact effort in the region to facilitate learning. Identifying community members who are seen as trustworthy and are passionate for the work to serve as champions is an important step in creating community buy-in.

The second precondition for successful collaboration is early financial support from an anchor funder. In Grand Isle, the Foundation dedicated resources to holding community meetings, paying salaries to the conveners, and contributing the time of their communications and policy specialists. In the case of the Northeast Prairie Coalition, early financial support came from a nonprofit organization that sought to scale up collective impact as a model for reducing negative childhood outcomes across the state (Zuckerman, 2020a). Early funding is particularly important as collective impact efforts may take several years to enact.

The third precondition for successful collaboration is a sense of urgency that mobilizes potential members, which may materialize in the form of a crisis that has reached a breaking point (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). In Grand Isle, low student achievement initially provided a sense of urgency. As the group learned about collective impact and the needs of their own community, the number of youth dying by suicide became a much more urgent concern, and the focus shifted to supporting the well-being of youth through relationship-building. The conveners and others reported that this urgent need kept members engaged and focused. In Northeast Prairie, preventing children from entering child protective services served as the initial focal point, with a community assessment further identifying needs in reducing redundancy of service providers, streamlining services, and increasing the provision of early childhood care and education.

In addition to these preconditions, previous research on rural collective impact efforts suggests that when core members have a history of working together, it provides a foundational social network from which to grow (Zuckerman, 2016a, 2020a). Research on rural cross-sector collaboration suggests building from existing collaborations and engaging active organizations is more effective than starting from scratch (Miller et al., 2017). For example, this was particularly evident in the Grand Isle Network, which built on two long-standing partnerships in K-12 and early childhood education that brought together school leaders, community college administrators, and Foundation staff to work together to improve programs. Network members commented on the strong relationships, despite the low population density. A core team member described this strength:

When I go to meetings in [the capital city] they're like, how do you get the person, the Head Start person to work with you, and part of it is because I know who she is and I can call her up. Do you know what I mean? So, there are a lot of strengths here in that . . . it is a strength that you KNOW who needs to be at the table and so when you call a meeting, you expect that who can make the decision and can do that is there. Or else you call them again.

In Northeast Prairie, the initial steering committee had existing relationships, and the early childhood workgroup had largely been meeting previously in another form. The chair of the early childhood committee reported that previous efforts “were kind of overlapping, so many members [felt] that it made sense to blend [the two groups] Some of us are tried and true

for a long time.” Several members had been working on early childhood issues in the community for “around a good eight years.” This committee continued previous efforts, such as growing their school supply drive, as well as starting new efforts including plans to create a new childcare center.

Developmental Phases of Collective Impact Work

Once these preconditions have been established, Hanleybrown and colleagues (2012) identified three phases of collective impact development: *Initiate Action*, *Organize for Impact*, and *Sustain Action and Impact*. Their previous work as consultants informed the development of the phases, particularly their work with primarily urban collective impact efforts spanning education, housing, employment, health, and environmental concerns.

Initiating for action includes mapping the landscape of stakeholders—identifying work already underway (e.g., existing partnerships or initiatives, collecting baseline data, and identifying a leadership table of credible champions). In Northeast Prairie, several community leaders championed the idea of collective impact and became the first steering committee. The initiating stage in Northeast Prairie also included a community needs assessment and asset mapping conducted with approximately 100 individuals. This work was undertaken by the nonprofit organization that provided backbone support during their launch. In Grand Isle, foundation staff and school leaders initially engaged in conversation about academic achievement. Building on this shared concern, they organized a trip for staff and school leaders to hear Geoffrey Canada speak about the Harlem Children’s Zone. This experience shifted the conversation from “failing schools” to the need to bring the community together to support children and youth. Foundation staff then intentionally brought together a cross-sector of community members from the eight component school districts to engage in visioning activities. Over 100 individuals attended these meetings. At the third meeting, the conveners presented a strategic plan and asked volunteers to form the core team of leaders. Over forty individuals took up this challenge.

The second phase, organizing for impact, brings stakeholders together to develop a common agenda, identify shared measures, and identify a backbone organization. At this stage, partners engage in initial efforts to align the work of partner organizations to the common agenda. Part of this work includes developing a “roadmap” or a document that brings the common agenda to life and gathers members together on the same page (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). For the Grand Isle Network, the initial strategic plan failed to gain traction, and a study trip to visit the Strive Partnership in Cincinnati⁶ jump-started a revision process. It took a year of conversation among members and required efforts to reframe and repackage ideas brought forth by the conveners. The aspirational goals and promises to youth in the community were revised and revisited until the group gained consensus through a “fist to five” process, which allowed members to express varying levels of agreement.⁷

Roadmaps for collective impact efforts should provide an evidence-based description of the problem, a clear goal or goals, a variety of strategies for effecting change, guiding principles, and a plan for course correction and evaluation (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). Institutionalized ways of thinking among stakeholders in different sectors can complicate this process, and developing a common agenda requires deliberate dialogue in civic spaces to reach a shared understanding of the problem (Stone et al., 2001). Once a roadmap has been developed, data systems can then be

aligned to the metrics identified in the roadmap to support course corrections and evaluation. However, developing the data systems can be challenging due to the costs and risks involved in sharing data. The Grand Isle Foundation provided significant funds for a shared data dashboard that would bring together youth survey data with data from the education and public health systems (Zuckerman, 2016a). Conversely, the Northeast Prairie Coalition experienced challenges in convincing members to use a common data system, with members reporting resistance to sharing data and learning new systems. This reportedly created challenges for tracking individuals served by the Coalition and reporting to funders.

The second phase requires stakeholders to determine geographic boundaries of the project, with the knowledge they may change in time as needs evolve. In Grand Isle, the Network landed on the same geographic boundary served by the Grand Isle Foundation. Members reported this area is widely understood as the “Greater Grand Isle Area” and includes the towns and villages that rely on the economic hub of Big River. In the Northeast Prairie Coalition, members initially identified the county seat as the service area but have since expanded to include smaller neighboring communities. The convener reports they will work to connect individuals in their region with service providers regardless of where they live.

In the third phase of sustained action and impact, stakeholders prioritize actions, systematically connect data, and put processes in place to sustain active learning (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). They do so through cascading levels of collaboration, with a steering committee of community leaders providing leadership and oversight for working groups, each of which addresses a particular area of the roadmap. In Northeast Prairie, these groups include people concerned with early childhood, basic needs, and positive youth development as well as a rapid response taskforce that connects families in crisis with services. Each of these groups meets independently once a month and comes together to share every other month at the Coalition meetings. In Grand Isle, the challenges of working within such a large geographic area with diverse constituent communities prompted conveners to develop a different model of cascading collaboration, with groups of youth and community members creating action plans based on survey data in their own school (Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018). These groups were linked together to share progress across communities by the backbone organization. Both collective impact efforts have a leadership table of between eight to twelve individuals, strategically selected to represent various sectors, such as K-12 education, early childhood, mental health, health, social services, and the faith-based community.

While these phases have been presented as linear, frequently there is a need to regroup in a previous phase. For example, in the Grand Isle Network, the original Core Team of leaders mobilized around a strategic plan, yet it did not lead to action. External learning opportunities reinvigorated the group, which led to a revision of goals over the period of a year to create a roadmap document they described as the “community’s promise to young people.” The resulting document clearly outlined promises and aspirations for youth and provided direction for members. Following the development of the roadmap, the Foundation contracted with an educational consulting firm to develop a survey aligned to the vision. This baseline data was then released to the public, and a new, smaller, more accountable leadership team was developed to act on the baseline data. New structures were put in place to support community-level groups in developing strategies based on this data and to connect the work of these groups to accelerate learning (Zuckerman, 2016a).

Attending to the Softer Side of Collective Impact

Hanleybrown and colleagues (2012) identify the importance of social relationships, and specifically breaking bread, as the glue and lubricant of collective impact. The conveners and other backbone staff members in Grand Isle reported the importance of providing food along with a warm and welcoming environment. Another member reported the importance of conversations in such relaxed settings, “If you’re just having a conversation in your backyard over a hotdish, how can you get upset? You can’t! You can talk about things.” Similarly, meetings of the Northeast Prairie Coalition featured lunch and candy in the middle of the tables. The strength of social relationships was observed throughout the meetings, which frequently featured good-natured teasing and laughter. The convener reported, “[Northeast Prairie] is big enough that you don’t run into the same people every day . . . but small enough that somehow everyone knows [everyone].” The importance of these social relationships to collective impact suggests rural communities have an advantage in that the small size of communities provides opportunities for members to interact across multiple settings.

However, according to one of the conveners of the Grand Isle Foundation, the high level of interdependence of individuals makes it challenging to have difficult conversations that rock the boat. The isolation of rural communities can also create challenges in creating bridging relationships that bring in new ideas (Miller et al., 2017). Similarly, social and cultural divides in rural communities can limit the participation of those outside of middle-class professional networks. In Grand Isle, one member reported the need for intentional strategies to engage parents with lower incomes “because it is not going to happen by invitation or natural interactions” (Zuckerman, 2016b). Balancing the strength and unity of the leadership table with the need to attend to bridging relationships within and beyond the community is an important consideration for collective impact development.

Mindset Shifts for Collective Impact

Enacting the conditions of collective impact in place is necessary but insufficient to generate change. In order to work as intended, collective impact needs to be accompanied by mindset shifts on the part of partners and their organizations. These mindset shifts break down into three categories: *who is involved*, *how people work together*, and *how progress happens*. The first mindset shift includes getting the right mix of stakeholders’ eyes on the problem. Complex problems require complex solutions. Bringing together multiple perspectives can improve the understanding of the problem while building a sense of mutual accountability through the recognition of interdependency (Kania et al., 2014; Lawson, 2004). However, this work is complicated by institutionalized ways of knowing in the helping professions (Hooper-Briar & Lawson, 1996) and requires strong facilitation from backbone staff. Additionally, bringing the perspectives of those experiencing the problem supports the development of effective strategies. This requires a further shift by human service professionals to rethink power relationships, accountability, authority, and responsibility to empower clients as keepers of invaluable knowledge (Lawson, 2004).

The Grand Isle Network primarily engaged in this mindset shift through their efforts to engage youth in problem-solving and action planning at school. Network members worked to recruit students who were not typically considered for such projects because they might, as one

member described, “have a different perception of what it means to be connected because they’re not involved in sports and stuff.” He highlighted the importance of “reach[ing] out to kids who might not be the natural ones to go to . . . kids from a broad section who aren’t used to having their voice actually being heard as much.” With the facilitation of adults, these youth groups examined their school’s youth survey data and planned actions and events to address them, most frequently focusing on building relationships between youth and community members. However, implementing this type of mindset shift comes with challenges. Members of the Northeast Prairie Coalition, for example, expressed a similar desire to bring family members to the table but have likewise struggled to do so, in part because their meetings are held during the workday. However, like Grand Isle, they have worked to engage youth through the schools to plan a youth forum.

The second mindset relates to how members work together. Part of this includes structuring cascading levels of collaboration to provide space for problem-solving. In Northeast Prairie, this structure consists of working groups that meet monthly and are connected to the steering committee by each group’s chair. The steering committee provides vision and direction to the Coalition as a whole. Additionally, members of all of the workgroups meet every two months to share their work and engage in learning about specific programs and opportunities. In Grand Isle, these groups were place-based rather than issue-based, and structures were developed to allow members to learn across these groups. The long-term plan included multiple opportunities to bring these groups together to learn from one another, and Foundation members envisioned doing so would create a more widespread understanding of the need for regional solutions for shared challenges.

This mindset shift also includes a recognition of the importance of relationships. Diffusion of innovation, or how new ideas spread, is a social process facilitated by trust and dialogue (Kania et al., 2014, Weick, 1995; Zuckerman, 2019). Members of the Grand Isle Foundation, which served as the Grand Isle Network’s backbone organization, described the focus on building trusting relationships as part of their organizational “DNA” and as the “special sauce” that allows them to bring the community together to engage in work. As noted previously, the conveners’ use of facilitation strategies contributed to the development of relationships that limits contention in conversation. Additionally, members noted that previous collaborative efforts laid the groundwork for organizations to understand that the process works and to develop trust in the give and take of collaboration. According to one Grand Isle Network member, this required developing a shared understanding that partners are at the table for the same reason, but that at times, one group may receive more resources to support the greater good (Zuckerman, 2016a).

Finally, this mindset shift includes sharing credit for the work. In Grand Isle, the foundation staff spoke specifically about not wanting to be credited for the work; rather, they wanted to disappear into the background. This included creating norms that would allow members autonomy to do the work and talk about it without approval from the Foundation. Foundation members viewed this as creating wider ownership of the collective impact effort by allowing people to see themselves in the work and to “amplify” the work already happening in different communities and organizations. However, others mentioned challenges in letting go of credit. A member of a local nonprofit, for example, stated the challenges of funding the same organizations as the Foundation and that, “I don’t want to take credit, but the community needs to know we’re behind it.”

The third mindset shift addresses the types of solutions collective impact efforts might apply. Kania and colleagues (2014) suggested the need to maintain an adaptive approach rather than

rely on technical approaches. Similarly, they suggested looking for a variety of interventions aimed at multiple causes of complex problems rather than seeking a single solution. Complex problems require multiple approaches, executed simultaneously and in a coordinated manner across multiple organizations and sectors (Kania et al., 2014). In Northeast Prairie, Coalition members engaged in a variety of efforts within each of the working areas. For example, the early childhood group worked to improve access to professional development opportunities for childcare providers while simultaneously working on a plan to create a new childcare center. However, due to contracts and grants, they were sometimes locked into technical solutions such as the use of an evidence-based parenting workshop. While members were enthusiastic about the workshop, the chair of the committee reported challenges in getting parents to attend the free six-week program, regardless of when and where they offered it. Flexible, adaptive approaches and real-time data use would suggest that despite having a strong evidentiary base of effectiveness, it might not be the right intervention in the community at the current time. In Grand Isle, the scattershot approach took a geographically dispersed form, with groups working on issues in their school community.

Conclusion

This chapter described the process of collective impact, focusing on examples from two rural communities that used it to address wicked, complex, social problems. While collective impact has been codified into a series of preconditions, conditions, and stages, research in rural communities suggests the process is not linear (Zuckerman, 2016a). More importantly, there is no cookbook for collective impact, as the process itself is the strategy. Each collective impact effort is as unique as the community that embraces it, because successful cross-sector partnerships require adaptation to place (Lawson, 2013; Zuckerman, 2019). This work requires learning not only about how collective impact works but also about the local community (Zuckerman, 2019). As one of the conveners of the Grand Isle Network put it, models for collective impact must be *adapted* in a rural community; they cannot simply be adopted. Such adaptation requires mapping assets and social networks, collecting data on needs, and engaging in ongoing dialogue among members to create the shared understandings of local needs and potential solutions that support collective action (Zuckerman, 2019).

Collective impact requires an initial investment in a convener, through both salary and capacity building, who can mobilize community members, identify champions, and facilitate learning and dialogue. Initial funding should support a backbone organization to serve as a container for the work by providing the space for collective impact to emerge. This funding may come from within the community or from external sources but is vital to the success of collective impact efforts as they require significant time to build trusting relationships, identify and describe challenges, develop a shared vision, identify metrics, create data systems, and engage in mutually reinforcing activities. In Grand Isle, the work of collective impact emerged through cycles of visioning and revisioning over the course of five years, at which point the Network was able to support action in individual school-communities. In 2015, the Network transitioned to a smaller, more accountable leadership council, which has taken on more backbone functions. Since then, the Network has continued to work with these groups, and at the time of the writing of this chapter, they were collecting a second round of survey data aligned to their roadmap to measure progress. Similarly,

the Northeast Prairie Coalition continues to evolve, growing in its geographic scope and working toward creating a new 501(c)3 to serve as a backbone organization, all while the working groups engage in mutually reinforcing activities.

Across both sites, and in alignment with findings on collective impact more generally, one of the major lessons is that collective impact takes time to develop and even more time to see results (Stachowiak & Gase, 2018). This suggests that collective impact is not for every issue a community faces but for those wicked problems with multiple causes that have proven truly intractable to isolated efforts and technical solutions. However, this long game approach holds potential for rural community development, particularly when it focuses on building the capacity of adults and youth (Zuckerman & McAtee, 2018).