

# Open Standards and Collective Impact

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## Aligning two frameworks to support projects tackling large and complex issues

Purpose	Relates Open Standards concepts with those of the “Collective Impact” framework, which provides guidance for organisations tackling complex “adaptive” problems involving multiple partners, which is relevant for many conservation projects.
Who should use this, and with whom?	Coaches, with key Project initiators and then with all partners in the initiative
When	Prior to commencing the project, then at all stages through planning. Implementing and adapting and on around the cycle.
How	Read the specific Collective Impact guidance documents and incorporate it into coaching activities through regular planning and implementing steps

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**Improving the *practice* of conservation  
by improving the *management* of conservation**

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Conservation Measures Partnership



## Open Standards and Collective Impact

<http://www.fsg.org/approach-areas/collective-impact>

The Collective Impact model provides a framework to help organisations work together to address complex problems that are generally beyond the scale of any one organisation. Since its [initial publication in 2011](#), and [updated guidance in 2012](#), the model has been widely used and is credited with providing support to many successful initiatives.

The Collective Impact model outlines five conditions that contribute to greater project success -

### The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

<b>Common Agenda</b>	All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
<b>Shared Measurement</b>	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b>	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
<b>Continuous Communication</b>	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
<b>Backbone Support</b>	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

The Collective Impact model is contrasted with more traditional ways of tackling large problems, often referred to as “isolated impact”, the characteristics of which are outlined in this table. The authors are clear that not all problems required a Collective Impact approach, however it is seen as a significantly better way to tackle “adaptive problems” - *“Adaptive problems are complex, the answer is not known, and even if it were, no single entity has the resources or authority to bring about the necessary change.”*<sup>1</sup>

Most conservation problems are “adaptive problems”, requiring the work of multiple partners. The Collective Impact model offers some useful research and insights for tackling these types of projects.

### Isolated Impact vs. Collective Impact

Isolated Impact	Collective Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Funders select individual grantees that offer the most promising solutions.</li> <li>◆ Nonprofits work separately and compete to produce the greatest independent impact.</li> <li>◆ Evaluation attempts to isolate a particular organization’s impact.</li> <li>◆ Large scale change is assumed to depend on scaling a single organization.</li> <li>◆ Corporate and government sectors are often disconnected from the efforts of foundations and nonprofits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Funders and implementers understand that social problems, and their solutions, arise from the interaction of many organizations within a larger system.</li> <li>◆ Progress depends on working toward the same goal and measuring the same things.</li> <li>◆ Large scale impact depends on increasing cross-sector alignment and learning among many organizations.</li> <li>◆ Corporate and government sectors are essential partners.</li> <li>◆ Organizations actively coordinate their action and share lessons learned.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> See more at: [http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact#sthash.0QMdulZX.dpuf](http://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact#sthash.0QMdulZX.dpuf)

Collective Impact and the Open Standards are seen as complementary. While the Open Standards helps to guide the development of the *content* of projects to ensure a robust plan is used (*working “in” the project*), Collective Impact offers guidance on dealing with the *co-ordination* of projects to get efforts pointing in the same direction and making the best use of limited resources (*working “on” the project*). The Open Standards community has often struggled with the implementation phase of projects, where efforts can dissipate or inadequate monitoring thwarts efforts for results-based management and adaptive learning. Leveraging the Collective Impact principles has the potential to improve the success rate in this area.

## The 5 Conditions of Collective Impact

The five Collective Impact conditions are inherent in components of the Open Standards (OS) and its supporting systems. The Collective Impact documentation referenced above provides detailed guidelines for working through each of these components. The linkages to Open Standards concepts and outputs are described below.

1. **Common Agenda** - OS provides guidance on identifying and involving stakeholders, and cultivating partnerships to create and sustain a project, in addition to establishment of the core team (OS Step 1A). Collectively these roles work together to define the Common Agenda – the project Scope, Vision, Targets (OS Step 1B), and Threats (OS Step 1C), as well as a collective understanding of the context the project is operating within (Conceptual Model – OS Step 1D). This agreed base is then built on by developing the theory of change in a participatory way (OS Step 2A), outlining the results that the participating organisations expect to occur as a result of their planned actions.
2. **Shared Measurement** - results from establishing agreed objectives and goals (OS Step 2A) and indicators (OS Step 2A, plus 1B for target viability), which are directly associated with the planned actions; and a system and process for collecting measures against these items as the project progresses (OS 2B, 4A,B,C) . Responsibility for regularly collecting the measures, and periodically analysing the results, is scheduled and budgeted as part of the collective work plan (OS 2C) and then executed as the project progresses (OS 3C). In terms of systems, Miradi and Miradi Share provide the mechanisms for collecting, storing and sharing the measures and results.
3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities** – these are the actions (Strategies and Activities) collectively identified as required to produce the desired results, and as articulated in the theory of change (Results Chain OS 2A). Workplans are developed, initially at a high level then in more detail, to clearly show which groups are taking on which actions, and the resources required to do those actions over particular timeframes, including specific individuals and organisations. The OS tools (Miradi and Miradi Share) ensure the workplan (activities) are specifically linked to the strategy (ensuring connection to the CI Common Agenda). The workplan should schedule in regular reviews of progress and collective events to maintain relationships and collaboration amongst all parties.
4. **Continuous Communication** - requires good oversight of execution of the Work Plan and Monitoring Plan (OS 3C), particularly to ensure that regular reviews take place (which is enabled by the 5th item below). Basing reviews on transparent data, assessed against agreed actions, helps to build trust between the parties and allows shared learning to occur. In terms of systems, Miradi provides a means for collecting progress reports and measures; Miradi Share makes all this information openly available to all participants in the project.

5. **Backbone Support** - requires that this role is explicitly defined and agreed by all parties. The role will generally be filled by one of the partner organisations with the specific skills and time available to adequately support the whole initiative; however in some initiatives it could be comprised of people from several organisations. Regardless of how the role is fulfilled, the collective needs to agree on the structure and ensure that it has the skills and capacity to take on the role; i.e. its activities need to be included in the Operational Plan (OS 2C) and workplan (OS 3A), with associated resourcing in terms of assignments and budget. Capacity assessment tools can help with these discussions.

The table below aligns the 5 conditions for Collective Impact with Open Standards products

Collective Impact Conditions for Shared Success	Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation
<b>Common Agenda</b> - All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions	<b>Strategic Plan</b> - Establishes the Scope, Vision, Targets, Conceptual Model (situation analysis), Results Chains (theory of change), Strategies and monitoring plan, developed collectively by all participants in the project.
<b>Shared Measurement</b> - Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable	<b>Monitoring Plan and supporting system (Miradi)</b> - show the agreed indicators, objectives and goals; and captures measures through regular review and evaluation / adaptation.
<b>Mutually Reinforcing Activities</b> - Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action	<b>Operational Plan and shorter-term Workplans</b> - identifies the actions supporting the theory-of-change, including assigned responsibilities and budgets, along with regular scheduled forums to review progress, analyse results, adapt plans, and share lessons learnt.
<b>Continuous Communication</b> - Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and appreciate common motivation	<b>Regular forums</b> for reviewing progress and analysing results supported by <b>System (Miradi Share)</b> to openly and transparently share up-to-date project information amongst all project participants and stakeholders
<b>Backbone Support</b> - Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and skills to coordinate participating organizations	<b>Co-ordinating partner</b> - This role is generally taken on by one of the participating partners, with assigned activities and resourcing needs included in the Operational Plan.

The alignment of OS and Collective Impact is clear in theory, but experience shows that it often falls down in practice. So what are the pitfalls, and how are they avoided? <sup>2</sup>

Conditions	Potential pitfalls and how to avoid them
<b>Common Agenda</b>	Development of the common agenda needs to surface any disagreements and aim to resolve them; if there is no real agreement on the problem being addressed, and the way to address it, then the group will likely disband at some point. Working slowly and deliberately through the elements of the Open Standards, particularly the Situation Analysis, and later the results chains, should bring out these different perspectives and allow the group to address them.  There are many partnership tools available through the broader Open Standards community that provide good guidance on participatory development of conservation plans and shared agendas. See for example the <a href="#">Conservation Partnerships Centre</a> .
<b>Shared Measurement</b>	Often "Measurement" is left up to some of the technocrats in the group, and is not well understood by the collective. Good measurement requires a significant amount of the project's resource, so any lack of buy-in can lead to the work being under-resourced, and consequently

<sup>2</sup> Includes points identified in discussions during an Implementation workshop at CCNet 2015 Rally

doesn't deliver the insights required.

While some of the detailed work can be productively developed by a sub-set of the group, the group as a whole needs to understand and own the high-level indicators, and regularly review the results being measured so that actions can be continually aligned. This is reinforced through using a shared system such as Miradi Share that reports the results and is accessible to all parties.

The emphasis here is not just on "measurement", although that is critical; the key emphasis needs to be on "shared" – the partners in the collective need to commit to the way they will measure their progress and success, which includes the indicators, the methods for measuring them, and the methods for analysing the results. The collective should aim to bring in multiple lines of evidence and have regular discussion about them, rather than just agreeing on a few key indicators.

Shared measurement should focus not just on assessing the work of the project, but should also regularly assess how the collective itself is functioning and make any necessary adjustments.

**Mutually Reinforcing Activities**

Workplans can suffer from similar problems to measurement – being left up to a few individuals and consequently not well understood. They can also suffer from poor assignment of actions to various groups. Mutually reinforcing activities means each group should take on the specific activities at which it excels, in a way that supports the actions of others. The collective should discuss the 'ecology' of their organisational relationships and the project – for example, in a healthy system each organisation inhabits its niche and supports the rest - in an unhealthy (weedy) one there is competition for niches.

The collective as a whole should ensure that each group has the capacity (in terms of skills, knowledge, resources) to do the assigned work, and if not, collectively work out how the capacity can be provided or the work reassigned.

It may not be necessary or desirable for the collective to see the detailed workplans of each group but the high-level commitments should be collated in one agreed plan to aid understanding and enable tracking of progress.

Projects generally take multiple years to produce worthwhile results, so any initial enthusiasm can fade if efforts are not taken to maintain relationships, such as informal social gatherings and regular formal reviews of progress. These actions should be scheduled ahead and included in workplans.

**Continuous Communication**

Communications can fade away unless the groups have reasons to communicate – regular scheduled reviews provide such a mechanism. There are many electronic ways to encourage communication, but there is no substitute for periodic face-to-face interaction. The project can also struggle if the "wrong" people are sent to participate in meetings; the key decision-makers need to stay involved in the project's progress and direction, and not delegate all participation to lower-level staff who can't easily influence results.

**Backbone Support**

This aspect is often dealt with inadequately - the collective might not explicitly address the need for this role, or agree who should fulfil it, or ensure that they have adequate resourcing to fulfil it. Coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare. See table below for further details of this role

## The role of Backbone Support

In addition to the main Collective Impact resources shown above, there are specific articles providing guidance on the critical role played by the backbone organisation; for example, see this report on [large global initiatives](#), and [see here](#) for articles from FSG, which includes this summary table -

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

## The evolution of Collective Initiatives

Research from FSG and other indicates that large collective initiatives generally evolve through four phases, outlined in the table below. These stages take time and focussed effort; short-cuts are rarely effective in the long run.

	Phase I Pre-Launch	Phase II Initiating Action	Phase III Organising for Impact	Phase IV Implementing and Sustaining Impact
<b>Governance &amp; Infrastructure</b>	Convene community stakeholders	Identify champions and form cross-sector steering group	Create infrastructure (backbone function, work groups, other collaborative processes)	Facilitate collaboration across groups; refine structure as needed
<b>Strategic Planning</b>	Hold dialogue about issue, community context and available resources	Map the landscape and use data to make case; begin to frame the common agenda	Create common agenda (common goals and strategic priorities)	Support implementation (alignment of partners to goal and strategies)
<b>Community Involvement</b>	Facilitate community outreach specific to goal	Engage the community to help frame common agenda	Engage community and build public will around common agenda	Continue engagement and conduct advocacy
<b>Evaluation and Improvement</b>	Determine if there is consensus/urgency to move forward	Analyse baseline data to identify key issues and gaps	Establish shared metrics (indicators, measurement, and approach)	Collect, track, and report progress (process to learn and improve)