Thinking about Systems: Tips and Resources

When tackling complex and persistent issues, it is important to maintain a broad system lens, to include a diverse range of partners and to re-frame issues in a way that can shift thinking, and therefore the approach in addressing systemic issues. Through approaches such as collective impact, community partners can come together from a broad range of sectors to work towards systemic impact on issues which require complex, collaborative and cross-sector solutions.

Please find below examples of system-level projects and a list of tools, resources and key questions that may facilitate your community in engaging stakeholders for system-level changes.

Examples of system-level projects that collectives have undertaken to enhance collaborative networks such that they work and behave differently to achieve broader impact:

1. Identify specific service integrations or coordination structures that are working well and expand them
2. Develop a public campaign for advocacy purposes
3. Develop a platform for up-to-date information on community services and supports (as a shared resource)
4. Work through data sharing agreements (so client information can be shared and user experience is optimized)
5. Develop stronger networks by hosting regular events and meetings
6. Design a common intake process for service providers to use
7. Define a set of common measures to measure progress/success
8. Host a series of lived experience meetings to map the user experience using empathy mapping and client centered design principles
9. Collaborate for a fundraising campaign for resourcing
10. Collaborate for a grant submission for a shared volunteer coordinator

(Source: Examples provided by R. Turnbull, Eco-Ethonomics, facilitator for the collective impact process in the Keeping Kids Healthy through Collective Impact project, 2019)

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Key questions worth posing and discussing with community partners:

1. What shared service models are already achieving enhanced impact? How can we work more effectively to amplify these?
2. What would it take to have a breakthrough in collaboration?
3. How can we strengthen the bonds within a loosely formed network?
4. If we focus on the system, instead of direct service, how can we rearrange and reassemble the actors in the system to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness?
5. What system-level services could enhance our capacity to sustain collaboration long-term?

(Source: Examples provided by R. Turnbull, Eco-Ethonomics, facilitator for the collective impact process in the Keeping Kids Healthy through Collective Impact project, 2019)

Other Tools and Resources for Thinking about System Change and Collective Impact:

- This webinar discusses the concepts of using collective impact for systems change. In this webinar, John Kania discusses a number of concepts from one of his latest publications The Waters of System Change (2018)* and spends some time discussing the 6 conditions for system change. https://collectiveimpactforum.org/resources/achieving-systems-change-collective-impact-virtual-coffee-discussion
  *Source: The Water of Systems Change by J. Kania, M. Kramer, and P. Senge, June 2018, available at https://www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change

- Based on this work, the social impact team at FSG developed an activity to help groups think systematically about social change. The tool can be downloaded from this website by creating an account (you'll need to enter your name/email/title/location). https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/water-systems-change-action-learning-exercise#download-area
  The exercise is divided into three parts:
    Part I: uses the "inverted pyramid" introduced in The Water of Systems Change (see page 2) to perform an external assessment of opportunities to make progress on the social or environmental issue you are focused on.
    Part II: uses the same framework to consider internal conditions within yourself and your organization that should change in order for you to better support progress on your issue.
    Part III: takes what was developed in Parts I and II and asks "What to do next?"

- FSG has also created this toolkit specific to systems thinking which may be helpful for facilitation pieces at future meetings. These tools can be helpful whether you are looking to understand an issue and its system, create a plan for action, or learn and refine as you go. Be sure to check out their tool matrix to understand which tools can be helpful for different scenarios the tools are appropriate for: https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/systems-thinking-toolkit-0

- The toolkit includes:
  - Guide to Actor Mapping
  - Guide to Appreciative Inquiry
  - Guide to Eco cycle Mapping
  - Guide to Timeline Mapping
  - Guide to Trend Mapping
  - Guide to the World Cafe Method

- Another useful tool to facilitate discussions around what people might be experiencing as "cracks" in the system is an empathy map; you can download a tool here: http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/empathy-tool-map

- One additional interesting read when thinking of system-level changes:
  A challenge many community leaders may face in undertaking the endeavour of collective impact initiatives is gaining buy-in from partners, or recovering from past ideas about attempts of similar work. In either of these instances, there may be a some elements of building trust, which J. Kania also discusses as a key in going from a collaboration to being able to shift power dynamics. This article by the Tamarack Institute TURF, TRUST, CO-CREATION AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT discusses trust, particularly in a community context: http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/turf-trust-co-creation-collective-impact

This list of tips and resources was created as part of the Keeping Kids Healthy through Collective Impact project. To learn more about this project, please visit www.opha.on.ca/KeepingKidsHealthy.aspx

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