

# Are Backbone Organizations Eroding the Norms that Make Networks Succeed?

by Danielle M. Varda

IT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY COMMON IN AGENCIES across industries and sectors for organizational missions to coalesce around the idea that by working together with diverse partners, we can collectively achieve more than anything any one of us could do alone.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the “network way of working” has become the norm across many organizations, communities, and even entire sectors.<sup>2</sup>

Networks can be multisectoral, but of course they do not have to be—they only require a collection of people and institutions with a common purpose and way of communicating and coordinating action. If you look at them this way, networks have a history as old as (in fact, older than) the nonprofit sector itself. The level of formality and centrality, the modes of leadership, and the relationships between entities have all changed fluidly with time and circumstance. But humans love to codify structures, so recently (in the last half century) we have been subject to a few attempts at doing so.

Are these structures useful, not useful, or actually destructive? Each of the attempts at codification, it seems, comes with its own problems of misplaced priorities and blindness to contextual realities that are lying in wait to pounce on the best-laid plans. So it was with attempts to force collaboration from above through funding structures for a half-century following the 1970s, and so it is with the idea of collective impact (CI), as developed by the consulting firm FSG in 2011. In this paper, however, I focus just on the assertion by FSG that collective impact models—involving cross-sectoral planning and action—must have a backbone organization. That is not only not necessarily true—the challenge is that to the extent that the backbone succeeds, it also can begin to erode community norms of collective accountability and engagement that gave rise to the network in the first place, undermining the very muscles and ligaments needed for coordinated action.

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## The Network Way of Working as the New Normal—But How Do We Do It?

While the network way of working has become a sectoral norm, there is always a great deal of uncertainty about how to do it and what practices are going to lead to beneficial outcomes.<sup>3</sup> This makes sense, because ambiguity creates discomfort, and networks include, by definition, diverse partners and organizational missions. And while collaborating across sectors has become a familiar mantra of strong strategies and good governance among organizations, it took many of us by surprise when the collective impact framework proposed by FSG became synonymous with any and all forms of coordinated action in the public and nonprofit sectors.

If this was not on your radar when Elinor Ostrom set the stage (and subsequently won a Nobel Prize) for her work on collective action theory,<sup>4</sup> you might think that the collective impact model is the foundational model of how networks collaborate (or should collaborate) in today's times.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, not only have organizations been perfecting the art of networks for decades via practical learning but also, for nearly as long, scholars have built upon and joined Ostrom's lifelong commitment to developing sense-making structures, models, and frameworks for coordinated action. While Ostrom's work on collective action has predominantly informed the environmental sciences on a pathway of developing incentives for coordination—determining the rules for use and institutional constraints and opportunities—the basic foundations of coordinated action toward a common goal resonate across the disciplines. No amount of new labeling can dispel the conclusion that “collective impact” is equivalent to old wine in a new bottle.

As many people know today, the CI model proposes that five conditions should be met for a network to be effective. These are: having a common agenda; having a shared measurement system; engaging in mutually reinforcing activities; open and continuous communication; and governance of a backbone organization. The authors of the model state, “. . . we believe that there is no other way society will achieve large-scale progress against the urgent and

complex problems of our time, unless a collective impact approach becomes the accepted way of doing business.”<sup>6</sup> The authors are not wrong that tackling wicked problems is going to take audacious innovative efforts; however, what *is* questionable about their statement is whether the collective impact model is “the only way”—or in fact, a way at all. Many of us are still waiting for evidence that this model is the way forward, in relation to any other model already proposed.

When the CI model first came out, some of us in the field asked a lot of questions about how it was developed. While we could not find a validation process that demonstrated that CI is an effective and successful model, we were able to buy into it. After all, we knew that the model—albeit somehow now packaged into relatable terminology and a definitive list of five best practices—was built on years of cumulative evidence from practice (along with the work of hundreds of dedicated scholars in the field) that working together is more effective than working alone. Despite the large quantity of scholarly literature and empirical research on the topic of networks and collaborative processes, it is still difficult to find the evidence for this particular model as presented.<sup>7</sup> As someone who has spent more than fifteen years evaluating networks and trying to figure out what makes them effective, I was especially curious about why this five-point model was spreading so quickly and was so heavily adopted despite any evidence base to support it. The CI model has been an overall positive initiative for the field of networks, as it has brought a common language to the table and made it easier for people to explain what they are doing (or hoping to do). It has even provided funders with a way to frame how they invest in networks, and policy-makers a way to legislate these kinds of efforts. That said, I'm more worried than not about the future of networks and collaborative processes with the CI model as a guiding framework.

## Collective Impact—Why It Is Counter to the Foundation of Collective Action

There is little doubt that the CI model now has a legacy in the field, and its introduction by Kania and Kramer in 2011 will be regarded as a moment when things began to coalesce around a

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recognizable framework for collaboration across sectors more clearly than at any point prior. It is not clear, however, whether the five-point model was particularly pertinent or if it was simply introduced at a serendipitous moment when the field was ready for a new model. The model is now commonly used, but several important criticisms of it have been articulated—including whether a common agenda is necessary for coordinated action to be successful,<sup>8</sup> and the lack of a community organizing and equity approach.<sup>9</sup> But my primary concern, as stated earlier, is the model's assertion that networks must have a backbone organization to be functional and effective.

No one will argue that any collective effort needs to have some agency, person, or team that is coordinating things—that is almost unarguable. However, where things seem to have gone astray is in the proposition that, in order for networks to succeed, sustain, and evolve, a backbone organization (described by the CI model as an organization “with staff and specific set of skills to serve the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies”<sup>10</sup>) must be a *constant core function* of the effort, perpetually creating a condition of dependency on a top-down management structure. This presents several problems that could put in jeopardy the fundamental synergy of a coalesced group of motivated people that led to the rise of the network way of working.

First, the network way of working has become the predominant strategy for solving difficult problems and having social impact, because people have experienced the power and synergy of the network—namely, the power of collective energy, collective decision making, collective accountability, and collective resource sharing. Networks have bloomed and thrived because as a society we have seen and felt the evidence of what networks of organizations can achieve. I worry that, rather than building on the back of shared responsibility and accountability (likely the hardest and most important work for sustaining a network and reaching goals), the backbone model lets members off the hook and deprives networks of the very spirit in which they have thrived. In other words, members are relieved of having to be all-in regarding how the network is managed and instead are given an

easy out by having a separate entity do the work.

Second, the backbone approach asserts that a top-down structure of organizing partnerships toward collaborative processes will yield the greatest results. In fact, it has been suggested that the backbone not necessarily even be a member of the network but rather some outside entity that can be responsible for the administrative burden of running and managing it. This creates an inherently perverse power structure, where the backbone organization is not only given authority to administratively organize the network processes but is also given the role of the proxy voice of the network members. The lack of engagement in shared leadership by those most affected in the community—an outright rejection of a community organizing approach—threatens the very nature of the required shared accountability and decision making that gave rise to networks over time. “Once community collaboratives have formed using a top-down approach, converting them to models that involve community residents as equal partners—whereby they have real influence over the agenda, activities, and resource allocation—is very unlikely.”<sup>11</sup>

Third, networks are inherently context-dependent. To suggest that any set of five practices, including a common top-down structure, will fit all (or even most) contexts is counter to the very nature of networking. Each network has its own backstory, is set in a specific context, and embedded in a unique culture. The way that people in one community relate and communicate with one another can be very different from how people in other communities relate and communicate with one another. Variations in available resources, historical experiences, traditional power dynamics, and assessed community needs make it nearly impossible to create a set of core principles for this work. What *is* consistent across communities is the need for skill development to build the capacity of all stakeholders to participate in and contribute to networks.

### Didn't Elinor Ostrom Already Teach Us This Lesson?

It would be interesting to look at what theorists of this topic might say about the conditions that

foster network success. The work of Elinor Ostrom is particularly relevant in this regard.

The only woman to win the Nobel Prize in economics, Elinor Ostrom focused her work on how humans interact with ecosystems. Although her work looked specifically at how collective action toward common-pool resources such as forests, fisheries, oil fields, or grazing lands can be managed successfully by the people who use them rather than by governments or private companies, her lessons resonate across modern collective efforts to solve complex problems across the board. Ostrom taught us that collective social problems can be solved in the commons—provided there is communication among the parties that builds up trust over time, with agreed-upon rules that enable participants to engage in peer monitoring and enforcement.<sup>12</sup> If we apply that lesson more broadly to public goods and ecosystems that involve diverse actors across sectors, we might begin to question why, in these times, a third-party entity in the shape of a backbone organization might suddenly be so relevant and important. How did we find ourselves here, with a dominant model whose success depends on a backbone organization?

### **The Shift away from Shared Accountability Is Starting to Trend—Why This Is Not Good**

Of the hundreds of networks that the Center on Network Science has evaluated over the last few years, those that are using the CI model of a backbone organization function and behave differently from the more traditional, grassroots types of networks that evolved over the last decade. Members using the model seem more detached from the challenge of running the network, less engaged in shared facilitation, and less committed to the accountability of ensuring network success than those not using the model. We have witnessed networks dissolve when funding for the backbone dissolves. The need for and reliance on funding has always been an issue, but we are now experiencing a time when networks are focused on raising funding for a *backbone*, and it isn't even clear whether these forms of networks in fact reflect the types of efforts that made this phenomenon a reality and a way of working.

For organizations just coming into collaborative arrangements, will they no longer remember the difficult work of bringing together a diverse group of partners and working hard to build a collective accountability system? Will they trend toward allowing proxies in place of authentic community voice? They will know that backbones put a lot less pressure on everyone to be facilitators, planners, and organizers of the work, and few will argue that this is not attractive, given the level of resources and work it takes to be a member of, and manage, a network. But if that outcome means that the network it is supporting no longer has the identity for which it was initially developed, then what are we left with?

Backbone organizations themselves are thriving. Today you can even hire consultants and firms to be your backbone agency. As a member of a review committee for a national grant-making organization, I have seen the expected move toward funding collaboration as a priority, but what continues to surprise me is the seeming acceptance of funds that historically have gone directly to organizations to deliver services and develop programming now going to backbone organizations that offer to manage the network. I worry that this shift of limited resources is no longer supporting the agencies that deliver the programming nor getting split among the partnering agencies to cover their own “relationship budgeting expenses.” In turn, we see less funding for nonprofits to build capacity for programming, and more funding for capacity-building for backbone organizations. It's not clear how this is promoting a collective synergy to impact social change.

Perhaps even more problematic is that backbone organizations are beginning to ask questions about what to do when their funding is gone or their missions drift from that of the network they are managing. We have advised three backbone organizations going through this process of what to do when they no longer want to play that role. The biggest challenge is the lack of shared accountability of the members (who are mostly unwilling to take on the work of the backbone) and the backbone's uncertainty of what to do with the network of organizations that may not actually be a network at all but rather a well-managed

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group without a true collective process for shared governance.

### How Do We Mitigate the Risks that Backbones Pose to Collaborative Processes?

It appears that we are at a crossroads. A few years into the CI model, we still do not have definitive research validating its five points. We have many good anecdotes of CI working, and some that show it did not work. In a recent project, our team analyzed one hundred cross-sector networks—some that used CI as a framework and others that did not. We found that networks that used CI were more confident in their definition of their shared mission, but they also asserted that they were far less likely to be sustainable without funding (compared to their non-CI network counterparts).

But ultimately, we really don't know what is working and what is not. What follows are a few suggestions for mitigating the risks that backbone organizations (and other parts of the collective impact model) pose to the future of collaboration and networks:

1. As a field, can we agree that we need to test and question the CI model—and every other model—more rigorously before we funnel much-needed program funds into them? The obvious challenge to doing this is the unavailability of big data to help us understand what works. As a network scientist, I know firsthand how hard it is to get these data, but we need to get past the barriers and embrace the challenge.
2. Let us invest in network members—not backbone organizations only—and commit to building the capacity of all stakeholders to participate. Network leadership is a skill all members need, not just the backbone members. Can we consider all members of the network responsible for moving the work forward, in the capacity that best suits the network? Can we get back to shared responsibility and accountability? Can we agree to move away from a top-down governance model and return to approaches that encourage shared accountability and a more

balanced power structure? Backbones need to have an exit strategy. This commentary is not to question whether collaboratives need to be organized and managed—they do—but rather to push back on the concept that backbones are continuously required for the success of the network. Backbones may have a core function, but a successful backbone should have an exit strategy, where the backbone aims to remove itself and leave the network to survive and prosper on its own. I would encourage all networks to ask what they have left if they remove the backbone from the picture. If the answer is that the network does not exist in that case, then perhaps it is not actually a network at all but rather a well-managed group of organizations. To reap the benefits of a network—the synergy that exists when a committed group of organizations and people work together to solve a problem—a structure must exist that does not require a perpetual external backbone as the glue. Instead, it requires an interconnected web and equitable distribution of authority, responsibility, accountability, and decision making.

I think most will agree that networks are pretty exciting, and that when they align across all the important factors, we can witness a big impact. The network way of working has evolved from the years when networks were viewed by many as novel and only seen in niche areas to being a standard way of operating in organizations. I believe it is important that we continue to ask for evidence of effectiveness as models get introduced that propose guiding principles, before we redesign and funnel scarce resources to following them. It is important to examine if such models are stripping networks of the very spirit in which they have thrived. And, at a minimum, we should be building the evidence base to show what works, and not fall prey to trends that risk diminishing capacity for our nonprofit and public-sector organizations as they try to follow the path to sustainability and impact.

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## NOTES

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