Making Collective Progress

A review of existing approaches and principles for making progress towards shared visions for social change

START >

Welcome

There are many ways for individuals, organisations and groups to work together, and in relation to each other, towards their shared ambitions for social change. This review aims to help you invest in collective practices and create conditions in which they can thrive.

What's in this review?

A summary of **10 established approaches** for making collective progress >

These should provide you with a simple way in to understanding different approaches which you could follow with further exploration and reflection.

10 principles for making collective progress, which are common to the different approaches >

These principles surface common threads from different collective approaches, which you can use to develop your practice and mindsets.

Welcome

Who's it for?

This is for anyone seeking to apply collective approaches and principles in practice, such as:

Organisations, individuals and groups working towards shared or interdependent goals in their sector, community or area.

This could be in relation to a particular system or outcome (e.g. education, mental health) or with specific audiences (e.g. young people, families). You may be wanting to make more of your shared roles, resources and activities as you focus on deeper, longer-term or systemic change.

Infrastructure, network or anchor organisations that are seeking to build more collective potential among those you work with and on behalf of, such as network members or partners. You might be seeking to open up new practices, secure funding for collective efforts, or create conditions for your network or members to thrive.

Funders, commissioners or others bringing resources to particular communities, areas, outcomes or systems. You may be hoping to make the most of your combined investment by working towards collective missions or fostering and supporting collective ways of working among those you invest in.

Where's this review come from?

This review was created with modest resources by a small team at the social innovation organisation Shift, where we've been trying to understand and use collective approaches in different ways, particularly over the last few years. Whilst we haven't been able to be comprehensive in this review's coverage of existing practice and literature, we hope the sources provided allow and inspire deeper and wider exploration of collective approaches.

We're grateful to supportive partners who've contributed inspiration, learning and examples to this work. These include Catalyst, Relationships Project, the Feltham Convening Project and, in particular, previous work of Cassie Robinson on collective models of social change and networks and systems.

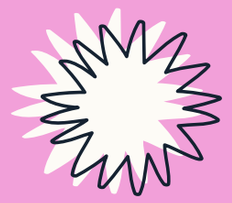
We'll continue to work alongside others to understand, apply and adapt different collective approaches and share what we learn. If you would like to share any reflections or suggestions, please get in touch on hello@shiftdesign.org.

This review was made possible through funding from the National Lottery Community Fund.

Shift

COMMUNITY FUND

Approaches for making collective progress



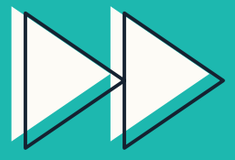
Collective impact

Creative coalitions

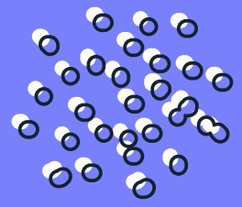
Field building

Learning alliance approach

Model of large scale change



Movement building



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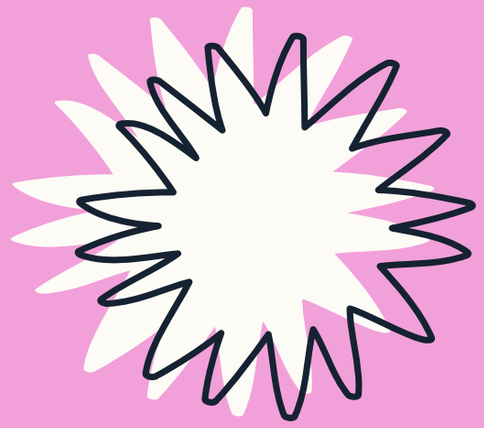
Approaches for making collective progress

The approaches featured in this review include models, frameworks and mindsets that have been created and used to increase the collective progress of individuals, organisations and groups working towards shared or interdependent aims. Some we have come across in our own work at Shift over the past few years, and some we have surfaced through desk research, so the list is no means exhaustive. We do hope, however, that their inclusion will allow you to get familiar with a range of different approaches and be inspired to employ the best suited in your own efforts towards shared goals.

For each approach included here, we've brought together a brief overview and the key sources we've learnt from, which may serve as a jumping off point for your own broader exploration. In the following section, common threads and themes from these approaches have been brought together as a set of 10 principles for making collective progress.

Before you begin...

The landscape of collective thinking and practice within the social sector is broad, diverse and evolving. Many of these approaches overlap or represent branches of the same ideas. Some of the most interesting ones, which take on questions such as those related to power, equity and inclusion across collective efforts, are emergent and have not yet been included here – but can be added over time.

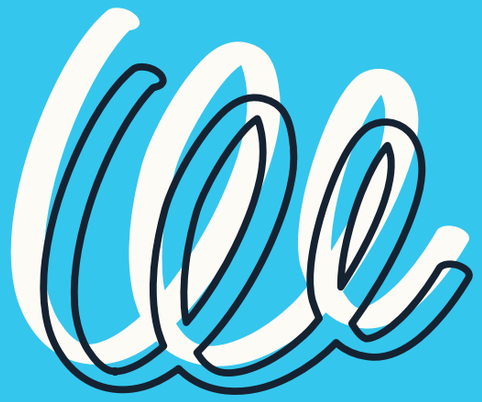


Collective impact

Collective impact is the commitment of a group of actors, who may be from different sectors, to a common agenda for tackling a specific social problem. These initiatives "involve a centralised infrastructure, a dedicated staff, and a structured process that leads to a common agenda, shared measurement, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities among all participants." (Kania and Kramer, 2021).

Sources

- Collective Impact, Kania, J. and Kramer, M., 2021
- Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work, Hanleybrown, F., Kania, J. and Kramer, M., 2012
- 3 Reasons Why Collective Impact Model is the Future of Social Change, Pierce, A., 2019
- Collective Impact Principles of Practice, Collective Impact Forum, 2016
- Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework For Community Change. Cabaj, M. and Weaver, L., 2016



Creative coalitions

In campaigning for civilians to be safe from harm in war zones, Crisis Action have developed a model for organising powerful creative coalitions. These coalitions aim to solve particular problems or injustices. This model has a number of components – a strategic convenor, a stay-behind-the-scenes strategy, a diverse set of networks and voices, 'opt in' rather than full consensus, creative tactics – each working together to help enable greater impact.

Sources

- Creative Coalitions: A Handbook for Change. Crisis Action. Martlew, N., 2021

Field building

A field building approach aims to intentionally coordinate organisations and individuals around a common issue or challenge, to ensure they work more effectively and efficiently to bring about change. Field building consists of activities and investments which aim to align and develop the work of the field to drive impact. These activities can include generating evidence through research, strengthening organisational and professional development systems and establishing shared norms and narratives.

Sources

- Social Innovation Generation. n.d. Field Building. Social Innovation Generation
- How Do You Build a Field? Lessons from Public Health - The Rockefeller Foundation. O'Neil, K., 2015
- The Strong Field Framework: A Guide and Toolkit for Funders and Nonprofits Committed to Large-Scale Impact. The Bridgespan Group for the James Irvine Foundation, 2009
- Field Building for Population-Level Change: How funders and practitioners can increase the odds of success. The Bridgespan Group, 2020

Learning alliance approach

This approach brings together multiple stakeholders working at different levels (national, distinct, community) within a system, to co-create knowledge around an area of interest and to act on it. Learning takes place through dialogue and interaction and is action-oriented, so that it generates a change not only in the individuals involved but in the system itself.

Sources

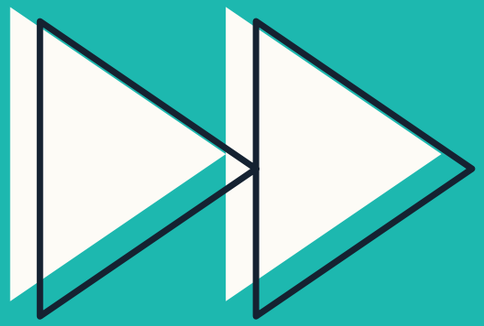
- How to use learning alliances to achieve systems change at scale. Darteh, B., Moriarty, P., Huston, A., 2019
- Learning alliances: An approach for building multi-stakeholder innovation systems. Lundy, M., et al.

Model of large scale change

This model aims to help support transformational change across complex health and care environments. Developed by the NHS England Sustainable Improvement Team and the Horizons Team, this model includes a set of methodologies and tools which aim to enable multiple key stakeholders across geographical locations to move towards a desired vision.

Sources

- The Change Model Guide. NHS England, 2011
- Leading large scale change: A guide to leading large scale change through complex health and social care environments. NHS England, 2011

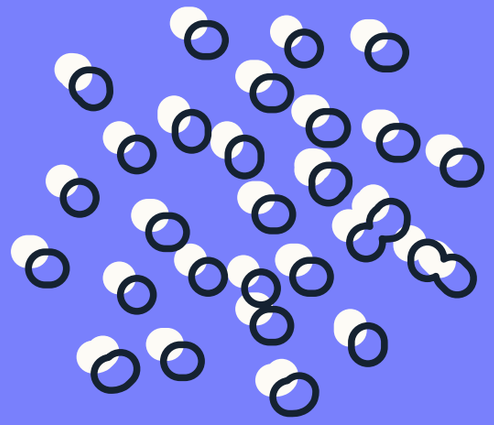


Movement building

Movement building involves galvanising individuals and organisations around an (often political) mission or shared vision to achieve large-scale, systematic change – rather than incremental improvement. Movement builders seek to drive forward progress towards this shared mission through activities involving advocacy and activism. Rather than rallying round one leader, movement building is about rallying around a cause or injustice and working towards changing it.

Sources

- Building Movements, Not Organizations (SSIR). Gottlieb, H., 2015
- 4 Principles of Collaborative Movement-building. Forsgate, V., 2016
- Movement Building - The Social Change Agency
- Movement Build Action Guide. People & Planet

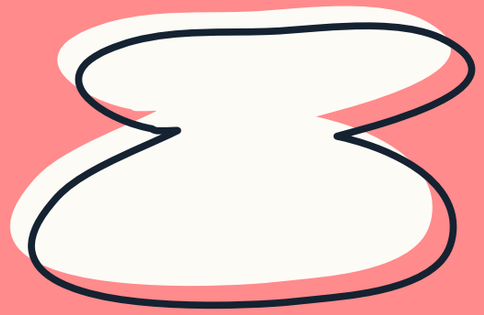


Networks for system change

A network approach to systems change is where an individual sees themselves and their work as a part of an interconnected network and works within, across and between organisations in a system to achieve large-scale social change. It aims “to bring about lasting change by altering underlying structures and supporting mechanisms which make a system operate in a particular way. These can include policies, routines, relationships, resources, power structures and values.” (Abercrombie et al.)

Sources

- Systems Change: a guide to what it is and how to do it. NPC and Lankelly Chase. Abercrombie, R., Harries, E., Wharton R., June 2015
- Catalyzing Networks for Social Change: a funder’s guide. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO) and Monitor Institute. Scearce, D., 2011
- Transformer: How to build a network to change a system: A Case Study of the RE-AMP Energy Network. Monitor Institute. McLeod Grant, H., 2010
- Five Steps to Building an Effective Impact Network. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Ehrlichman, D., Sawyer, D., Wei-Skillern, J., 2015
- The Most Impactful Leaders You Have Never Heard Of. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Ehrlichman, D., Sawyer, D., Wei-Skillern, J., 2015
- Principles for Network Thinking and Action. Ogden, Curtis. 2018



Platforms for partnership

This approach builds multi-stakeholder platforms or hubs to catalyse partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations. These platforms are mechanisms that bring together businesses, governments, NGOs and communities around issues that impact both markets and society in order to achieve sustainable solutions.

Sources

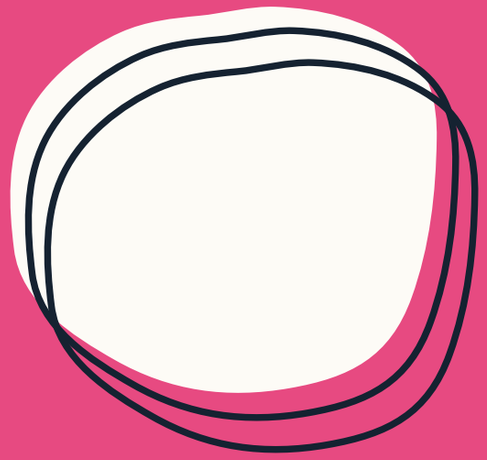
- Platforms for Partnership: Emerging good practice to systematically engage business as a partner in development. Reid, S., Hayes, J.P., Stibbe, D.T., 2015.
- Partnership platforms for the SDGs: Learning from practice, Dave Prescott and Darian Stibbe, The Partnering Initiative, and UNDESA. 2020.

Transition design

This approach aims to understand the systems behind complex problems and design a series of small intentional changes which enable progress towards a more desirable and sustainable future vision. This design-led approach offers a framework – visions for transition, theories of change, posture and mindset, and new ways of designing – for bringing together a variety of practices and disciplines in order to identify leverage points for interventions.

Sources

- Transition Design. Irwin, T., Kossoff, G., Tonkinwise, C. and Scupelli, P., 2015.
- The Emerging Transition Design Approach. Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación. Irwin, T. 2019.



Collaborative working

There are a number of useful additional ways of working for groups, networks and movements to make progress towards shared goals, which fall outside of the specific approaches included above but are connected in the way that they prioritise collaboration. We include some key sources and guides here for your further exploration.

Sources

- Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success. The Foundation Review. Wei-Skillern, J., & Silver, N., 2013
- The Power of Collaborative Solutions: Six Principles and Effective Tools for Building Healthy Communities. Wolff, T., 2010
- Tom Wolff's Power of Collaborative Solutions. World of Work Project.
- Working in Place: Collaborative funding in practice. Learning from five case studies. IVAR. 2017.
- Collaborative Working: How publicly funded services can take a whole systems approach. Institute for Government. Miles, E., Trott, W., 2011.

10 principles for making collective progress

These principles include ways of working, behaviours and mindsets that are helpful in making collective progress towards shared goals. We've included 10 principles here that are prioritised by some or all of the collective approaches explored above. Again, this list is not exhaustive nor is it a set linear series of steps. However, we hope that these principles can help you focus on key learnings from the approaches and spark reflection in your own collective efforts.

For each principle, we've included a summary and some examples of how it's relevant within the different approaches.

10 PRINCIPLES >

10 principles for making collective progress

01 ***Build a shared vision*** >

02 ***Democratise decision making*** >

03 ***Think beyond the organisation*** >

04 ***Nurture relationships*** >

05 ***Think long and short*** >

06 ***Build a pluralistic, diverse and representative*** >

07 ***Learn and adapt as a network*** >

08 ***Distribute leadership*** >

09 ***Prioritise sustained and flexible support*** >

10 ***Build on strengths*** >

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1. **Build a shared vision**
2. Democratise decision making
3. Think beyond the organisation
4. Nurture relationships
5. Think long and short
6. Build a pluralistic, diverse and inclusive network
7. Learn and adapt as a network
8. Distribute leadership
9. Prioritise sustained and flexible support
10. Build on strengths

Sources >

01

Build a shared vision

Unite and motivate participants by building a shared understanding of the challenge and a clear, collective strategy for making change.

Movement building

"By identifying the things that unite different groups, we can be better at building collaborative movements for change that amplify the actions and agendas of others" (Forsgate). As part of their movement building canvas, the Social Change Agency asks people to explore their shared values, shared purpose and shared experiences.
(The Social Change Agency)

Transition design

Within this approach, 'future visioning' draws on foresighting techniques to encourage stakeholders to look forward to a time when their particular problem is resolved. The aim is to look past potential areas of conflict and differences to a future that everyone can be inspired by and work towards. This can then inform interventions and projects which help move towards the desired future.
(Irwin, 2019) (Irwin et al., 2015)

Model of large scale change

"LSC is fuelled by the passion that comes from the fundamental belief that there is something very different and better that is worth striving for." It's necessary to both highlight the change that you want to achieve as well as why it is important when creating a compelling narrative that drives momentum. "If the vision is sufficiently clear and the collection of key themes comprehensive enough, what may seem at first like a chaotic lack of control actually comes together in the form of changes that connect with and build upon one another." (NHS England)

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Sources >

02

Democratise decision making

Build decision making structures that represent your network and design processes that set shared directions together.

Movement building

Some social movements may choose a consensus-based decision making process, where solutions are reached through an exploration of multiple ideas that may be weaved together to create something all members agree with. (People & Planet.)

Learning alliance approach

“Ensure the legitimacy of the hub. Learning alliances provide a space for stakeholders to make decisions jointly by building evidence for decision making. The change hub must therefore have the legitimacy to convene. It should avoid any appearance of pushing a particular agenda (other than the shared agenda of the alliance), model or technology.” (Darteh et al.)

Collaborative working

‘The Power of Collaborative Solutions’ highlights the importance of creating a democratic process in which everyone has a say. “No one likes to be “done to. To help overcome this challenge it’s important to try and ensure that those involved in a situation have some voice over its resolution. This could be a direct voice, or a voice through their leaders.” Bringing those closest to the problem into analysis and decision making is essential: “It’s very hard to fully understand problems unless you’re close to them.” (World of Work Project)

03 *Think beyond the organisation*

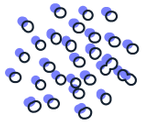
Think beyond individual or organisational goals and towards a shared vision. Utilise the strengths of partners and empower each other to be the best you can be.

Collective impact

The Collective Impact Forum, alongside its five conditions for collective success, highlights that "mutually reinforcing activities that the initiative takes on to achieve its goals should focus on collective program and system change strategies rather than individual programs or organizations." (Collective Impact Forum)

Creative coalitions

In taking on a strategic convenor role as part of a creative coalition, one must ask "not 'what can I do?' but: 'who can make this change happen?'" (Martlew) Thinking beyond individual goals and ego creates space for trust and ensures the development of the strongest strategy for collective change. (Martlew)



Networks for system change

RE AMP emphasise designing for a network, rather than an organisation. "We think of all the pieces of the network as nodes in a system, and that helps prevent a hierarchical organisation from developing. Members can understand that nodes are different sizes and have different functions, but that the relationships and the whole is what is powerful. The system isn't monolithic and linear, so the way the network is organised can't be either." (McLeod Grant and Monitor Institute)

Collaborative working

'Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success', from J. Wei-Skillern and N.Silver highlight principles that place mission before organisational gain: "Networked organisations do not strive to be the brightest star but rather to build the constellation that will enable achievement of the shared vision" (Wei-Skillern and Silver)

04 *Nurture relationships*

Relationships are key to collective progress. Build and nurture a culture of trust, safety, equity and respect among all members of your network in order to create resilience.

Platforms for partnership

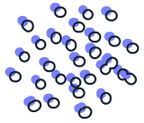
In building strong relationships between diverse actors there is "the need to 'go the extra mile' in order to achieve objectives and to meet the expectations of their partners. Demonstrating commitment, consistency and reliability will all contribute to the creation of trust between diverse collaborators," (Reid et al.)

Field building

"All members are stewards of connection, leadership, bridging differences and inspiring others. Members are seen as equal partners and peers resulting in flattened hierarchies and a deep sense of respect, trust and safety." (Social Innovation Generation)

Creative coalitions

"Constantly nurture relationships so they can endure periods of disconnection and withstand specific disagreements." (Martlew)



Networks for system change

"Trust not control. Unless they are built on a foundation of mutual respect and integrity, collaborations are unlikely to succeed, regardless of how much formal structure or strategic planning went into them." (Ehrlichman et al., 2015)

05 *Think long and short*

Develop a long-term goal to unite your network and make progress towards it by creating pathways with multiple checkpoints, which can ensure short-term wins to build momentum.

Model of large scale change

"Is your vision 'out there' and 'in the future'? Typically, if you are truly undertaking LSC, it will seem so distant and so in contrast with people's current reality that it may feel overwhelming or impossible. In order for people to get engaged they have to understand why they should be involved and what they can do, now or soon, that would be a clear and meaningful step along the journey." (NHS England, 2011)

Collective impact

"It is important to pursue a portfolio of strategies that offer a combination of easy but substantive short term wins to sustain early momentum for the initiative, as well as more ambitious, long-term systemic strategies that may not show impact for several years." (Hanleybrown et al.)

Learning alliance approach

"Learning alliances can be useful for individual projects, but the time-limited nature of a project is always a challenge. They really come into their own when they develop a broader agenda that is supported by multiple projects." (Darteh et al.)

Transition design

"Linking new and existing projects and initiatives together (through the co-creation of, short-, mid-, and long term visions) creates synergistic relationships among them and provides greater leverage for achieving short- and long-term goals." (Irwin, 2019)

06

Build a pluralistic, diverse and inclusive network

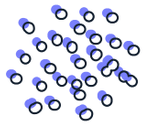
Create space for different voices and experiences, looking beyond those you might normally work with and alongside.

Platforms for partnership

"Any partnership projects need to be closely aligned with the needs of local actors, with local communities and organisations taking a leading role in such initiatives. Too great a dependence on external 'top-down' funding can endanger the credibility and viability of the platform at national and local level." (Reid et al.)

Transition design

"It is important to achieve a general, shared understanding of the problem and appreciation for the diversity of stakeholder perspectives and positions. This, in turn, becomes the foundation for a productive dialogue based upon empathy and trust." (Irwin 2019)



Networks for system change

"Those on the edge, or periphery, may be less connected and engaged, and they also bring their own value, to the extent that they provide lessons about adaptation, a willingness and ability to play in different spaces, and have connections to other important domains. In many cases, there is strength in following the lead of the margins." (Ogden)

Collaborative working

"It's very hard to fully understand problems unless you're close to them, so it's essential to bring those closest to the problem into the analysis and decision making process." (World of Work Project)

07

Learn and adapt as a network

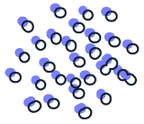
Put continuous, shared learning at the heart of your network to help everyone quickly understand what's working, what's not, and what could be done better.

Field building

"The dynamic nature of networks require agility and reflection about what is working, what is not and what is needed. Established systems for feedback loops enable this continuous learning." (Social Innovation Generation)

Collective impact

"Use data to continuously learn, adapt, and improve. This process requires partners to remain aware of changes in context, to collect and learn from data, to openly share information and observations with others, and to adapt their strategies quickly in response to an evolving environment." (Collective Impact Forum)



Networks for system change

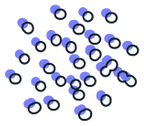
In 'Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it', "fostering a learning culture" is the final principle for implementing systems change. The paper advises the following can encourage this culture: encouraging experimentation and idea generation; building in time to reflect on learning; learning from what others are doing; adapting your approach to respond to what is learnt, little and often (Abercrombie et al.).

Collaborative working

'Four Network Principles for Collaboration Success' highlights "Network effects and change stem from many different experiments rather than looking for the single best answer." (Wei-Skillern and Silver)

08 *Distribute leadership*

Foster a culture where all members are given space to hold responsibility and take initiative, and where multiple forms of leadership can thrive.



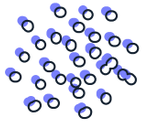
Networks for system change

RE-AMP, in building their network for social change, saw "multiple types of formal and informal leadership, coming from many different places: from funders, facilitators, consultants, staff, and members as well. This distributed leadership allows new ideas to bubble up from anywhere in the network; leaders pay attention to emerging patterns and needs, and then help direct action." (McLeod Grant and Monitor Institute)

Collective impact

"We have consistently seen the importance of dynamic leadership in catalysing and sustaining collective impact efforts. It requires a very special type of leader, however, one who is passionately focused on solving a problem but willing to let the participants figure out the answers for themselves, rather than promoting his or her particular point of view." (Hanleybrown et al.)

"For collective impact initiatives to achieve transformational change, leaders must possess strong facilitation, management, and convening skills. They must be able to create a holding space for people to [...] work out their disparate viewpoints, they must [...] foster shared meaning and shared aspirations among participants, they must [...] help participants understand the complexity and non-linearity of system-level change, they must be dedicated to the health of the whole and willing to change their own organizations in service of the group's agenda, and they must [build] relationships and trust among collaborators." (Collective Impact Forum)



Networks for system change

In their exploration of Principles for Network Thinking and Action, Ogden advocates for "resilience and redundancy instead of rock stardom [...] Among other features, resilient networks and network activity are built upon redundancy of function and richness of interconnections, so that if one node goes away, the network can adjust, support and continue the work or learning." (Ogden)

09 *Prioritise sustained and flexible support*

Build relationships with funders and other resource providers who believe in your collective ambitions and recognise the need to be flexible.

Collective impact

"Funders must be willing to support an open-ended process over many years, satisfied in knowing that they are contributing to large scale and sustainable social impact, without being able to take credit for any specific result that is directly attributable to their funding." (Hanleybrown et al.)

Platforms for partnership

"Any partnership projects need to be closely aligned with the needs of local actors, with local communities and organisations taking a leading role in such initiatives. Too great a dependence on external 'top-down' funding can endanger the credibility and viability of the platform at national and local level." (Reid et al.)

Collaborative working

'Four network principles for collaboration success' highlight that "by ignoring the alignment of values and trust that is necessary among partners, funders often inadvertently sabotage their own efforts to promote collaboration. Consequently, partners often come to the table for the wrong reason – the promise of additional funding for their organization, rather than affinity toward their peers or desire to work collaboratively." (Wei-Skillern and Silver)

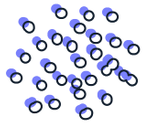
IVAR, in their analysis of five funding collaboratives, note the advantage of "independent funding as a source of developing new ways of working" as they may be willing to accept a lower assurance of success or strictly established outcomes. (IVAR)

10 *Build on strengths*

Build on the assets, knowledge, experience and relationships of the communities, systems or fields you're working in.

Learning alliance approach

"To be effective, learning alliances need to build on existing local systems rather than create parallel systems. The exception is if the local systems have no structure that accommodates learning." (Darteh et al.)



Networks for system change

In 'Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it' it is noted that the "first and most fundamental driver for systems change should be meeting the needs of beneficiaries and understanding the assets they have that can help." (Abercrombie et al.)

Creative coalitions

In choosing which conflicts to prioritise, Crisis Action applies five core criteria including "Added value: If there is already enough facilitation or you would be replicating work then you don't need to step in." (Martlew)

Collaborative working

'The Power of Collaborative Solutions' highlights the importance of creating a democratic process in which everyone has a say. "No one likes to be done to" so "ensure that those involved in a situation have some voice over its resolution", through "direct voice, or a voice through their leaders."
(World of Work Project)

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Thank you

We hope these approaches and principles will support you in your own endeavours towards collective progress.

We'd love to hear from you with feedback, builds and reflections. Please get in touch on hello@shiftdesign.org.