

A network diagram consisting of numerous interconnected nodes of varying sizes, some highlighted in a lighter shade of orange, set against a dark red background. The nodes are connected by thin white lines, creating a complex web of relationships.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT IN PEACEBUILDING: Lessons from Networking Efforts in Multiple Locations

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Section I: Introduction

CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) has been working with peace practitioners actively since the late 1990s. During that time, CDA conducted two sets of case studies regarding a wide range of peace efforts, produced two books based on the case material,¹ developed training manuals to guide better peacebuilding practice, and worked directly with practitioners in multiple conflict zones around the world. In the course of that work, CDA staff noticed that the many entities (organizations and individuals) working on an array of peacebuilding activities rarely managed to generate effective joint organizational efforts to achieve their shared peace goals. This concern was reflected in the case studies conducted by CDA's Reflecting on Peace Practice Program that resulted in the book *Adding Up to Peace: The Cumulative Impacts of Peace Programming* (CDA, 2018).

In the course of researching methods for promoting more effective collaborative action for peace, CDA staff and consultants became aware of the work of FSG regarding collective impact, as applied to networks, alliances, coalitions, and other similar groupings dedicated to shared achievements of social good in a variety of fields, including health and education.² CDA staff then adapted the FSG model of collective impact for application to peacebuilding efforts and produced the “Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding” (which was incorporated as a chapter in *Adding Up to Peace*).

Subsequently, CDA conducted four case studies, three regarding existing peacebuilding networks in Africa and Asia and one summarizing technical assistance provided to two emerging networks in Nigeria and Sri Lanka, in cooperation with Search for Common Ground.³ The four case studies were the focus of a consultation in Washington, D.C., in October 2018 and were discussed again at an experts workshop in Geneva as part of the Geneva Peace Week in November 2018. The reflections of the colleagues who participated in those events were then incorporated into a revised version of the Framework document.⁴ In order to hold the Framework document to a manageable size, references to the case studies were kept to a minimum. This paper will provide more direct reporting of the conclusions from the case studies and consultations. Readers are encouraged to consider its insights alongside the Framework.

In adapting the FSG collective impact model, the Framework presents five conditions for collective impact in peacebuilding:

1. Collective and Emergent Understanding
2. Collective Intention and Action
3. Collective Learning and Adaptive Management
4. Continuous Communication and Accountability
5. Sufficient Support Structures (“Backbone Support”)

1 *Confronting War: Critical Lessons for Peace Practitioners*, CDA 2003. *Adding Up to Peace: The Cumulative Impacts of Peace Programming*, CDA 2018. Both available on www.cdacollaborative.org

2 Hanleybrown, Fay, John Kania, and Mark Kramer, “Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 2013. John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Collective Impact,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*: 36–41, 2011. John Kania and Mark Kramer, “Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, January 2012.

3 Available on the CDA website: www.cdacollaborative.org

4 Available on the CDA website: www.cdacollaborative.org

These five elements, along with a series of important preconditions, were explored in the three case studies and through work with the two emerging networks. In addition, participants in the consultations articulated a series of principles that should inform any collaborative effort, emphasizing (among other things) control by local actors; adapting to local contexts; the importance of trust relationships among participating organizations; bottom-up approaches; sustained efforts over time; and the incorporation of mutual learning throughout. The Framework also incorporates two overarching approaches: systems thinking and adaptive management. The analytical tools of systems thinking enable a mutual understanding and visual mapping of how violent conflicts result from the interactions among multiple factors and actors.⁵ Participants in networks and alliances can then see how their disparate and complementary activities might be better aligned to generate greater collective impacts. Adaptive management allows flexibility in responding to positive and negative feedback, rather than adhering to predetermined approaches.

Section II: Common Trends That Emerged from the Case Studies

The three case studies of existing peace networks focused on the Mindanao Peaceweavers in the Philippines, multiple coalitions and networks in Kenya, and a network of peace proponents in the country of “Boendoe” (fictionalized due to the politically sensitive climate there). In addition, CDA worked with Search for Common Ground teams to support emerging networks in a neighborhood of Colombo, Sri Lanka, and in Jos, Nigeria. The objective of these case studies was to assess the Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding to see whether and how its principles and conditions apply to existing and new networks in helpful ways. As noted, case writers and representatives of the organizations involved come together in a consultation to share their reflections and suggest ways to strengthen the Framework. This section will present the observations from consultation participants, as well as from analysis of the cases themselves.

Importance of building trust and relationships. Collective impact, particularly efforts sustained over many years, requires trust and resilient relationships. Building those requires time and conscious effort. Related dimensions, such as solidarity, creativity, and respect for local cultural norms and practices, are central to the ways networks operate. Peace efforts are prone to shocks and setbacks; relationships must be strong enough to withstand those challenges. Mindanao Peaceweavers has become an effective advocate for justice and peace through multiple difficult periods and has learned to review and update its goals periodically. In contrast, the initial levels of trust in Sri Lanka were quite low — and considerable effort was required to generate enough mutual confidence to enable consideration of joint action.

Shared vision and analysis. Network participants are advised to develop a shared vision for collective action and impact. When multiple organizations come together to strive for greater shared effect, they must be clear on their mutual aims and long-term vision. This can be supported by joint problem or conflict analysis, but the *process of engaging in analysis together* is as important as the end product — or perhaps more important. When participants share their perspectives, listen with respect, and work to incorporate those perspectives in a shared understanding of the roots of conflict, they nurture trust that is the lifeblood of effective networks (alliances, coalitions, etc.). In some contexts, such as Mindanao, shared analysis is achieved

⁵ Methods for conflict analysis based on systems thinking is available from CDA: “Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics. A Resource Manual,” 2016. See also *Adding Up to Peace*, Chapter 8.

through less formal processes of dialogue and listening. In Nigeria, stakeholders developed, through several workshops and validation processes, a systemic analysis of the conflict that served as the basis for their action agenda.

Potential role of donors. Donors exert strong influence and can promote or hinder the development of common agendas and collective action. How and what they fund are crucial questions. Many donors fail to understand the need for sustained funding over as many as ten years following cessation of violence. Few are willing to provide support for “backbone” organizational structures that enable networks to function effectively. In many cases, donors also remain unaware of their own roles in conflict systems; if they are *in* the context, they become *part of* the context, for good or ill. In Kenya, donor support for network action surges during election periods but then fades when the difficult ongoing work of reconciliation is needed. Donors have also distorted civil society activities by funding work on countering violent extremism.

Accountability mechanisms. In alignment with the principle of local control, accountability for network activities and impacts must be primarily to those people most deeply affected by conflict and violence. Accountability processes must respond to feedback received from communities, laterally from among network members, and from more loosely allied colleagues. Secondly, there can also be accountability “upward” to governmental/intergovernmental entities or donors. In this regard, donors must support adaptive management approaches that respond to effects on the conflict systems, rather than predetermined outcomes or log frames. In Mindanao, accountability is achieved through members’ reporting of their actions toward commitments made, relying on relationships to ensure compliance with shared plans. In Boendoe, the risks posed by the political situation required a high degree of mutual confidence, especially at a local level — so the emphasis was on accountability to local communities and partners.

Elaborated structures versus flexibility. In several of the case studies, those interviewed emphasized that alliances or networks need a certain amount of organization to enable effective action, which requires dedication of time and resources. At the same time, such structures should remain as light as possible, to avoid burdensome financial commitments and to permit flexible responses to changing circumstances. The Mindanao Peaceweavers case noted “a self-sustaining form of flexible interdependence which keeps the network viable by drawing mainly on internal resources, and complementary skill sets including excellent dialogue facilitation skills and visionary approaches to advocacy.” In Kenya, “many interviewees appreciated the speed and flexibility that was provided to multi-actor programs in relation to electoral violence prevention, to support rapid-response mechanisms with limited administrative hurdles.”

Collaboration and complementary action paired with independence. The core purpose of collaborative impact efforts is to achieve stronger results together than any single organization could accomplish alone. At the same time, networks need to allow for a degree of *independence* of their members, within a range of aligned and complementary actions. Each organization comes with its own mandate, mission, and constituency, and these need to be respected. The contrasting missions are especially evident when alliances embrace both governmental

“I have a responsibility to share information and represent the voice of the people whom I represent. At any point I begin to project my own voice and personal interest, I have automatically failed to be accountable.”

— Stakeholder in Jos, Nigeria

and nongovernmental entities, as well as the private sector. Several cases noted (Kenya and Boendoe) that coordinating actions was easier at a local level than at strategic or national levels, but convening entities from government and civil society was quite difficult even in a single neighborhood of Sri Lanka.

Capacity of backbone organizations. In most settings, the backbone organization keeps the network organized, calls meetings, develops agendas, ensures regular communication, and reminds members of the commitments they have made. Particularly in new collective impact networks, the staff of the backbone organization must have the *skills* and *capacity* to engage diverse stakeholders, such as government, civil society, private sector, and community groups. In Nigeria, the initial stages of network formation relied on Search for Common Ground staff to perform backbone functions, expecting that those would shift as the network developed. In Kenya, the legitimacy and credibility of the backbone organization was a crucial factor, which changed over time and required a clear division of labor among network members and the backbone organization. Backbone functions were shared among three organizations in Mindanao, which worked well and altered as needs changed.

Section III: Challenges in Achieving Progress Toward Peace Writ Large

This section outlines the most frequently cited impediments to achieving impact. They are derived from the three case studies — Mindanao Peaceweavers in the Philippines, multiple networks in Kenya, and Boendoe. It also draws from the experience of working with Search for Common Ground to support emerging networks in Sri Lanka and Nigeria, as well as the consultation in Washington, D.C., and the experts workshop in Geneva.

Funding mechanisms and the role of donors. Increasingly, the funding instruments available to networks are not conducive to mobilizing long-term processes of coalition building, designing advocacy campaigns, and carrying out sustainable, complementary peacebuilding initiatives that can achieve long-term impact. Much of the donor support for networks and consortia is narrowly defined or event-specific, with at best a two- or three-year funding cycle. Short timelines and predetermined deliverables associated with restrictive funding mechanisms are a major impediment to sustained programming by networks, which require significant trust building among stakeholders, adaptation, and ongoing consultation, especially in polarized contexts.

As seen in the case studies of the Philippines, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka, the freedom afforded by flexible and continuous funding allowed networks to take appropriate and relevant initiatives to address emerging issues. Donors also tend to promote networks and consortia as a mechanism for administering funds and for maintaining low transaction costs, instead of supporting the organic growth of local networks. Furthermore, local-level networks are prone to shocks, such as shrinking civil society space, when working in politically restrictive environments. Uncertainty and the lack of continuity in funding further limits the ability of the networks to function effectively — when in reality, outsiders and donors are well placed to absorb some of the shocks facing the networks. The funding modalities and requirements unintentionally place international organizations in central roles, such as that of the backbone organization or convener, instead of enabling local institutions to fill those functions.

Sustaining networks. Throughout the case studies, networks and practitioners acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining momentum and keeping members and their constituencies engaged. Although some networks, such as the Mindanao Peaceweavers, have been able to maintain activities over many years, we found no single approach across the case studies regarding how to sustain networks over the long term through political and financial uncertainties, or even how to determine whether a network should continue to exist. Different networks have employed different strategies to overcome this challenge. In Mindanao, the network’s advocacy focus evolved with time to meet emerging needs, coupled with mechanisms within the network to allow new members to join and existing ones to temporarily downscale their participation. Another strategy is to maintain a revolving leadership function, in order to inject new energy and ensure internal, downward, and peer-to-peer accountability. While the networks must often — both by design and due to external factors — work on matters of urgency, they must also develop sustainable roles in their communities to achieve long-term change regarding key drivers of conflict.

Assumptions about stakeholder engagement and competition. The case studies found a common assumption about how networks arise: Prospective participants in an emerging network will automatically recognize the value of collective action and will, therefore, be motivated to join a collaborative effort. In reality, collaboration and coordination are labor-intensive and time-consuming endeavors. Many of these organizations are also vying for the same pots of funding, thus fueling competition instead of collaboration. Therefore, there are few obvious incentives for collaboration. The organizations that come together to form a network often have different mandates, ways of working, areas of focus, and administrative and financial capacities. Through continuous consultations and iterative and adaptive programming, network members can reconcile the differences among them and work toward collaborative and collective action. A key contributing factor to successful collaborations is ensuring that the effectiveness of the network’s activities exceeds the costs of collaboration.

Demonstrating results. Measuring impact in peacebuilding has proven difficult but not impossible. While progress has been made, the field is still struggling to identify how best to measure success.⁶ Practitioners generally agree that it is not possible to demonstrate results of peacebuilding efforts at the impact level in two or three years — although it is relatively easy to identify shorter-term outcomes. In any case, networks and consortia find it challenging to reach agreement on how to measure or evaluate progress toward their shared goals. This is particularly difficult at the Peace Writ Large level (broader societal change toward peace), that is, beyond individual or local community effects.

Vertical and horizontal linkages. As with all peacebuilding initiatives, and as highlighted in *Adding Up to Peace*,⁷ networks are enhanced by both vertical and horizontal linkages. That is, collective impact initiatives must build horizontal linkages through relationships and active connections among members, as well as vertical linkages from grassroots communities to national and even international entities. Such linkages not only provide strength in numbers but also help exert influence on policy makers and other more powerful groups that may be necessary for progress toward peace. For example, the initiative in Sri Lanka attempts to address very localized conflict, and has made deliberate attempts to connect with local- and national-level government. Similarly, many of the networks examined in Kenya worked with stakeholders at local, subnational, and national levels, including both government and private sector actors.

6 The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium has made considerable strides toward providing tools and conceptual frameworks for peacebuilding evaluation. PEC and other resources can be found on the DM&E for Peace website: www.dmeforpeace.org

7 See Chapter 3 in *Adding Up to Peace*, “The Role of Linkages in Adding Up.”

Section IV: Food for Thought

Multiple factors shape the conditions under which networks are able to positively influence wider conflict systems. As further elaborated in the “Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding,” these include a clear shared vision and goals, a common understanding of the driving factors of conflict, an ongoing learning environment, and some form of backbone support for network functions. These elements must be contextually grounded before being used as benchmarks for any specific network. The limited evidence that we have generated through the case studies, the consultations, and existing literature points to areas that need further consideration through field experience and careful, reflective application of the Framework.

Stopping or suspending networks. Networks may prove difficult to form in fragile contexts — or they may become inactive. Practitioners and donors need to ask why this might be true in a particular setting before initiating a collaborative effort with predetermined objectives. It is not clear that networks need to be active at all times; they can be reactivated to good effect when their role is needed. Given changes in the context, networks may no longer have a role to play — or they may need to rethink their core purpose and goals. In other circumstances, there may not be sufficient incentives for networks to form. To avoid the risk of continuing a network when it should phase out, it will be crucial to ask, “Why collective action?,” “Why this network?,” and “Why now?”

The roles and processes for shared vision and analysis. CDA’s Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding suggests that new networks should perform joint conflict analysis as part of developing a shared vision and complementary activities. However, the case studies show that some groups came together based on a shared vision from the start, while in other cases, the vision was built through ongoing work, nurturing relationships, and less formal methods for shared analysis. There is no definitive sequence of tasks. Instead the process should be determined by the extent to which the groups coming together already have a shared understanding of the issues and the depth of their relationships with one another.

(Possibly) false assumptions about willingness and incentives. Many practitioners hold an underlying assumption that forming multi-stakeholder networks for collective impact is inherently good. However, we must remember that diverse stakeholders coming together could potentially undermine the credibility or power of some groups and/or inadvertently strengthen the power and privilege of groups that are already dominant in the context. Those who are considering the organization of a network must think through the conflict-sensitivity implications of collective actions by calculating the potential inadvertent negative impacts.

Casting a wide net or convening a “sufficient” group. Accessing, leveraging, and securing available funding is an ongoing dilemma. But the enablers for effective networks also include skills and capacities of organizations, the optimal composition of multi-stakeholder groups, and the forms of partnership. In general, a wide network consisting of nongovernmental organizations, community-based organizations, government institutions, and private sector entities is considered to be sufficiently participatory and representative. However, in some circumstances, including some actors too soon may erode the legitimacy of the network, or the sheer diversity of voices may impede efforts to agree on joint action. Organizers must make a judgment call about how wide to cast the net — and remain prepared to adjust the strategy if the group turns out to be too broad or too narrow.

Conclusion

While peace proponents have been working in formal and informal networks, coalitions, consortia, and platforms for many years, self-conscious collective action in peacebuilding is still a relatively new endeavor, and we have a great deal to learn about what ingredients help ensure success or failure. We hope that the “Framework for Collective Impact in Peacebuilding” and the reflections offered in this paper contribute to the learning and support greater effectiveness of collaborative efforts for durable peace around the globe.

The authors welcome any observations, especially reflections on direct experience with collective initiatives. Please direct comments to info@cdacollaborative.org.