

## Why Involve Community in Collective Impact at all?

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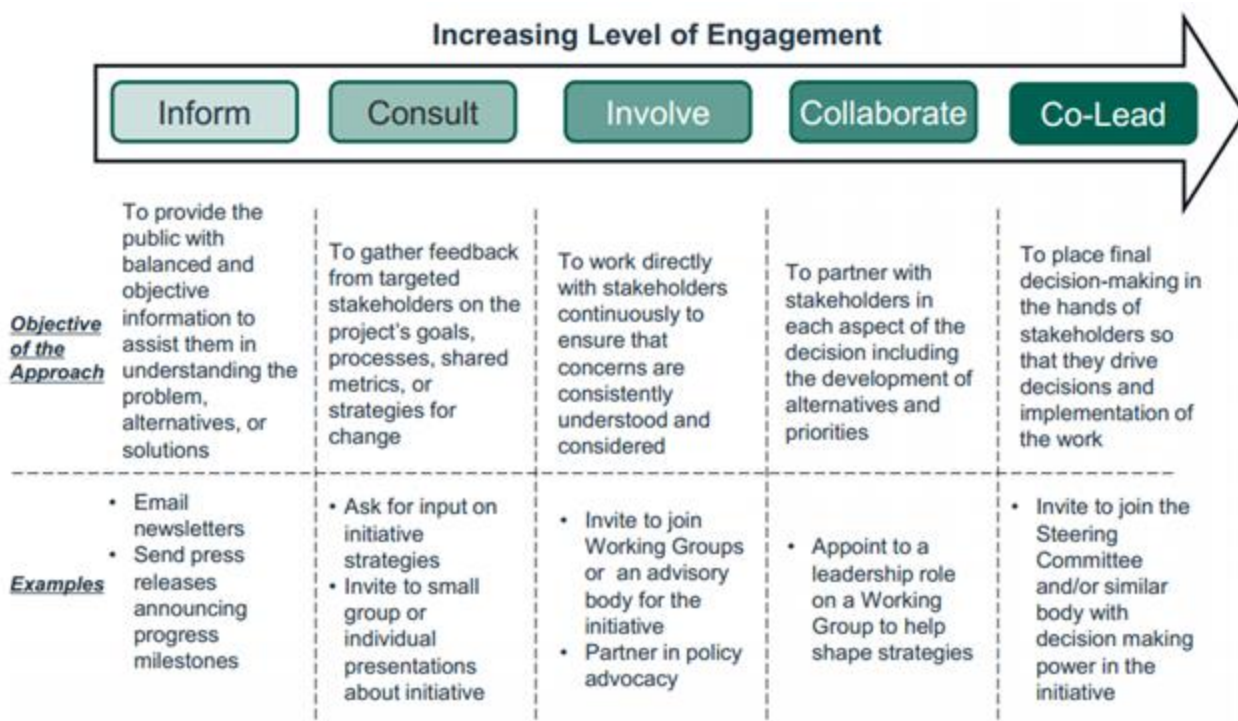
The recent surge of interest and resources around collective impact principles has highlighted an important concern and challenge for many practitioners: given the often grass-tops, institution heavy nature of collective impact, where does the community fit in? To help shed some light on this question, Living Cities has developed an online course that pulls existing resources from across the field to equip collective impact practitioners with tools for effectively involving and working with community members. To participate in the e-course, which launches today, [register now](#).

Like many others, Living Cities believes that genuine collective impact requires community members to be “at the table” in some way. But how and in what way community members are involved will depend on the nature of the initiative, what it is seeking to accomplish and even where in the stages of planning and implementation the initiative is in. We designed our e-course to help practitioners think through their strategies for effectively working with the people they aim to serve.

People often approach the task of [community engagement](#) as a singular, standard process. But successfully working with community members requires an understanding of the specific purposes for doing so across the different activities of an initiative, grounded in the context of the place in which the initiative is working. Instead of over-simplifying this process, practitioners should focus on designing engagement strategies that align specifically with the initiative’s goals.

A basic tool to think through how and why to work with community members is the spectrum outlined below, which was originally developed by [IAP2](#) and modified by the [Tamarack Institute](#) and the [Collective Impact Forum](#). This tool shows different levels of engagement on a spectrum from “inform” to “co-design,” with communities having higher degrees of influence over decisions made as the engagement levels move toward co-design.

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*Source: Collective Impact Forum, adapted from Tamarack Institute and IAP2*

While the specific strategies for working with community members are dependent on each collective impact initiative's local context, we believe that collective impact initiatives should have ambitions to engage community members at least at the level of "involve" on the IAP2/Collective Impact Forum spectrum referenced above. As the collective impact initiative evolves, leaders should continue to assess how they can move their work towards the "co-design" level on the CIF/IAP2 spectrum where possible to ensure that their efforts are truly inclusive of community members.

Not every engagement strategy within a collective impact initiative will meet this criterion—nor should it—as some activities undertaken through collective impact will need to rely on content expertise and therefore do not need to fully involve community members. For example, one [collective impact initiative we support in Albuquerque](#) has actively involved community members in identifying how the city can encourage entrepreneurship, particularly among low-income people. Yet they do not have a community representative as a part of the formal governance structure, which is comprised of public sector, education and business leaders. Community input shaped the direction of this initiative, but the implementation strategy was designed by leaders with an understanding of the relationships and dynamics of Albuquerque's city government and local economy.

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Without grassroots community members involved “at the table” in some way, collective impact initiatives can unintentionally diverge from their original purpose. Most collective impact initiatives focus on supporting low-income people, yet leaders involved with collective impact initiatives often come from positions of privilege and power. Even if leaders come from a background similar to that of those they are trying to serve, their leadership positions may give them a different perspective on issues or create incentives not completely aligned with the community. Because of this, they can be unknowingly disconnected from the challenges and needs low-income people face.

Without the ability to authentically connect with low-income people, a collective impact initiative will not know if it is actually creating solutions in service of the needs of the people it’s tasked to help. Collective impact leaders (and social sector leaders in general) may often [rely on their assumptions](#) about what community members need. These assumptions may, at best, lack a robust understanding of community needs and, at worst, be informed by harmful biases. Working with community members to shape and guide collective impact initiatives can mitigate some of the potential disconnects grass-tops collective impact leaders face in understanding community needs. However, it would be unrealistic to expect a collective impact initiative to be completely driven by community members, without other actors in the system voicing their perspectives and leveraging their positions and resources to drive enduring change. The goal of collective impact is to have all partners agree to a shared result, but in reality, the partners will sometimes be in conflict. That includes community groups as well.

Despite this challenge, addressing the needs of the community should be seen as the “north star” of any collective impact initiative. The purpose of collective impact is to serve the community, and neglecting to work with grassroots community members themselves would ignore the main reason for an initiative’s existence. While balancing the tensions between acting on behalf of the community and working towards initiative goals, leaders of collective impact initiatives should view their work as guided by community needs, not their own agendas.

Next week, we will release the second module of this e-course, which will focus on how to support community members to contribute to a collective impact initiative. If you haven’t yet, [\[register now\]](#) to participate in the e-course.

To further discuss community engagement in collective impact, join our Twitter “Study Hall” on Friday, March 20, 2015 at 1pm ET (10am PT; 6pm GMT) to ask

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your questions and share your insights. We will be joined by Sheri Brady from Aspen Institute for Community Solutions to help spark and moderate the discussion. Use the hashtag [#CEinCI](#) to join in.

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