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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, derived from an initiative conducted in the Central African Republic, explores the role of collaboration and shared measurement in promoting more effective programming in the peacebuilding field.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*Andrew Blum and Ruben Grangaard*

# Collaborative Design in Peacebuilding

## Lessons from the Central African Republic

### Summary

- Despite clear evidence of the effectiveness of individual projects, the peacebuilding field as a whole struggles to have a meaningful impact on broader conflict dynamics.
- To generate and effectively demonstrate such an impact, deeper collaboration, shared learning, and joint measurement frameworks across peacebuilding actors are critical.
- Collective impact approaches have been pioneered with success in other fields but have not yet gained significant traction in the peacebuilding community. That peacebuilders need to work in a more integrated fashion is increasingly acknowledged, but little progress has been made.
- Building on its experiences with the Initiative to Measure Peace and Conflict Outcomes (IMPACT) process, the United States Institute of Peace implemented its first collaborative process to develop a shared measurement framework across projects and organizations in a discrete geographical location, the Central African Republic (CAR).
- IMPACT-CAR developed a shared monitoring, reporting, and learning framework across seven peacebuilding initiatives, all funded by the US government, to improve awareness, coordination, and shared learning among partners.
- The project was successful in establishing a joint data-collection and reporting system that enabled synchronization of data collection and helped provide a common reference point for shared learning among implementers. It was less effective at demonstrating impact at an aggregate level across projects.
- Recommendations for future initiatives focused on creating collective impact initiatives in the peacebuilding field include the need to collaborate throughout the project cycle and for a shared agenda with a clear thematic and geographic focus.

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## Introduction

“How’s your project going?” is a question those within the peacebuilding field might ask. Most people outside the field, however, are not especially interested. They want to know instead whether the community is less violent, whether people are safer, whether children can go to school, whether people feel they can get their grievances addressed. This is as it should be. The project is not the important unit of analysis for peacebuilding. The community or society is.

Peacebuilding projects by their nature aim to achieve deep and significant change in a society. To have this profound impact, even at the community level, collaboration is essential. Virtually no individual, organization, or initiative can on its own have a meaningful impact on issues of violence and peace at the community level. Yet deep, sustained collaboration among peacebuilding organizations is the exception rather than the norm.

This challenge has become central to the peacebuilding field. To confront it, peacebuilders must be able to answer two questions:

- How do we design and implement our programs to ensure that they have broader impact?
- How do we gather the evidence necessary to know that our programs are adding up and having such an impact?

This challenge is not new, nor is it unique to peacebuilding, but the problem is now more acute for two key reasons. First, claims that individual projects are adding up to broader social change in conflict contexts are less and less credible. The peacebuilding field now has long histories in places—such as Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Sudan and South Sudan—where project after project, many of which are deemed successful, have been implemented without meaningfully affecting the conflict in a broader way. The term *project-itis* has entered the development and peacebuilding vernacular to describe just this dynamic.

The dynamic is coupled with greater demand for accountability. Across all sectors working on social change is an increased demand to be evidence-based and to demonstrate the impact of programming. Within peacebuilding, ultimately, impact must be demonstrated above the project level. This does not mean that unless violent conflicts end in Iraq or South Sudan, peacebuilders have failed, but it does mean that they must be able to have some demonstrable impact on larger conflict dynamics to be able to claim success.

The Initiative to Measure Peace and Conflict Outcomes—Central African Republic (IMPACT-CAR) was launched to develop and test an approach for demonstrating aggregate impact (or lack of it) of a combination of projects on broader conflict dynamics in CAR. Specifically, IMPACT-CAR was designed to assess the extent to which US government-supported peacebuilding programs in CAR improved community-level social cohesion and increased engagement between citizens and national-level institutions.

Because IMPACT-CAR was an experiment, reflecting on the lessons of the effort and putting those lessons in the broader context of efforts—as in this report—is important to improving collaboration within the peacebuilding field.

## Collective Impact and the Peacebuilding Field

The term *collective impact* became widespread after a 2011 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article that laid out an approach for donors and implementers to collaborate more effectively on a specific problem in a specific geography to create broader, more systemic solutions. In it, collective impact is described as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem.”<sup>1</sup>

This report uses the collective impact framework as a starting point because it provides a clear and concise articulation of the core challenge: How can you foster collaboration that allows organizations to have, and to demonstrate, an impact broader than their individual initiatives? The goal is to draw insights from the approach and apply them to the field of peacebuilding, not to advocate that the approach should or could be imported wholesale, or that the approach is the only or the best way to foster meaningful collaboration among peacebuilding organizations. These are open questions worth exploring.<sup>2</sup>

The *Stanford* article lays out five core conditions for a successful collective impact approach:

- Common agenda: creating a shared vision for change among all participants
- Shared measurement system: creating a shared approach for measuring success
- Mutually reinforcing activities: coordinating activities in a way that drives the shared vision and plan for creating change forward
- Continuous communication: committing to take the time for mutual learning, developing a shared language, and building trust
- Backbone organization: identifying a separate organization to manage and facilitate the overall collaboration

The article has generated considerable interest and commentary and given rise to numerous collective impact initiatives. The Collective Impact Forum, for instance, now has dozens of case studies and success stories in various fields, from health care to education to global development to juvenile justice.<sup>3</sup> The approach has also generated several significant critiques as well.<sup>4</sup> Among the critiques is the assertion that the collective impact approach is too top-down and shortchanges the importance of community participation, that it underappreciates earlier approaches to collaboration, and that it is too focused on measurement as opposed to learning. Many of the critiques are captured in another article that describes the need for a Collective Impact 3.0: “Are CI’s limitations significant enough to warrant throwing it away? No. The framework has too much ‘roughly right’ and is too successful in expanding the field of those who want to work together to build stronger communities.”<sup>5</sup>

So, how can this roughly right framework help us think about current collaboration within the peacebuilding field and how to push it forward? When we analyze the lessons from the collective impact field and assess them against previous collaborative efforts in the peacebuilding field, two lessons emerge that are crucial if we are to push forward collaboration within the peacebuilding field. The first is the importance of sustaining collaboration throughout the project cycle. The second is the importance of identifying workable strategies to fulfill the backbone function within the collective impact framework.

### ***Collaboration Throughout the Project Cycle***

One of the key insights of the collective impact approach, as illustrated by the five core conditions, is that collaboration must take place throughout the project cycle. In language somewhat more familiar to the peacebuilding field, the core conditions relate closely to project design (shared agenda, reinforcing activities), project implementation (continuous communication), and monitoring and evaluation (shared measurement system).

In regard to the design stage, the most common form of collaboration mechanism is the donor strategy, which can be either geographically or thematically focused. So, for instance, the US Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) South Sudan Transition Strategy was an attempt to create a shared agenda among implementing partners for South Sudan. Smaller funders will take this country-based approach as well. Humanity United,

***Among the critiques is the assertion that the collective impact approach is...too focused on measurement as opposed to learning.***

for instance, sought to create an integrated portfolio of grants to respond to the crisis in Burundi.<sup>6</sup>

Less frequently, strategies are devised among several donors at a country level. Again, using South Sudan as an example, the joint donor team—the governments of Denmark, Canada, Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Norway—sought to create a shared approach to building peace and reducing poverty.<sup>7</sup>

In the peacebuilding field, for the most part, donors drive strategy. Collaboration at the design stage not driven by donors is therefore minimal, though implementers and local partners may be part of the process.

In regard to the implementation phase, mechanisms for collaboration are both formal and informal. The UN cluster system within the humanitarian and disaster relief sector is an example of a formal collaboration mechanism. Although descriptions of the cluster system mention strategy and measurement, in practice its primary purpose is to coordinate a range of actors responding to a crisis situation, often rapidly and with little time for planning prior to the response.

In addition to formal mechanisms, informal coordination mechanisms will emerge in most peacebuilding situations that involve a large-scale international response and a large number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the ground. These can be semiformal, first-Monday-of-the-month working group meetings, or truly informal, let's all have a beer at the bar. Implementers on the ground understand the importance of coordination and collaboration. Thus, the goal of these efforts is to align programming being implemented to the extent possible within the constraints imposed by the donors funding the programs.

In regard to monitoring and evaluation, we see collaboration efforts at various levels. Organizations often try to implement shared measurement across their portfolio of programs. Catholic Relief Services (CRS), for instance, developed the GAIN Peacebuilding Indicators.<sup>8</sup> At the donor level, the country strategies described will normally include some form of joint monitoring and evaluation framework or process. Initiatives such as the Afghanistan Independent Monitoring Unit are also an effort to create shared monitoring among programs within a donor's portfolio.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the standard foreign assistance indicators (F indicators) are an attempt to create a shared measurement process across the entirety of the US government's foreign assistance portfolio, including peacebuilding projects.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, at these various levels, we can distinguish between monitoring and evaluation efforts that are organized before the programming takes place, as in the donor country strategies, and efforts that take place post hoc. Post hoc efforts can take the form of meta-evaluations, or meta-reviews.<sup>11</sup> They can also take the form of original research on a particular conflict or conflict issue after programming is complete that seeks to assess whether programming did add up to broader impact. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects' initiative on cumulative impacts of peacebuilding efforts is an important example of this approach.<sup>12</sup>

Any collaboration effort, of course, may operate at multiple stages of the project cycle. This is captured in table 1.

The South Sudan Transition Strategy, interestingly, might have served as the foundation for a full-project cycle platform for collaboration (see table 1). Given the strong presence of USAID in South Sudan, along with a core group of long-time implementers with experience collaborating, infrastructure did in fact exist to foster this collaboration. Given the renewal of intense conflict in South Sudan in 2011, however, it is not possible to know whether true collaboration along the lines of a collective impact approach would have emerged.

IMPACT-CAR was initially a shared monitoring and evaluation effort (see table 1). The initial idea was to create shared indicators, data collection, and reporting strategies among the implementers. As the effort unfolded, though, it expanded to become a useful tool in fostering collaboration among the implementers.

**Table 1. Collaborative Efforts within the Peacebuilding Field**

USAID South Sudan Transition Strategy	D, I, M&E
South Sudan Joint Donor Team Strategy	D
UN Cluster System	I
Informal Implementer Coordination	I
IMPACT-CAR	I, M&E
F Indicators	M&E
CRS-GAIN	M&E
CDA Cumulative Impact	M&E (post hoc)

*Note:* Effort categories are design (D), implementation (I), and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

All of these efforts are important, but the peacebuilding field still struggles with answering the two questions laid out earlier. How do we ensure that our programs add up so that they can have broader impact? How do we collect evidence to know that they do and are? This is the case in large part because none of them creates sustained collaboration throughout the project cycle—from design to implementation to monitoring and evaluation. We saw a similar dynamic emerge during the IMPACT-CAR effort.

### The Backbone Function

Another key insight of the collective impact approach is the need for a backbone organization to support effective collaboration. This organization, more specifically, facilitates the other core elements of the collective impact endeavor: developing a shared agenda, aligning activities, developing and implementing a shared measurement and reporting system, and so on.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that collective impact projects require both implementation and collaboration. Because they do, in addition to organizations focused on implementation, collective impact efforts require a separate organization, a separate subunit in an implementing organization, or even the donor, to focus on driving forward the collaboration.

This aligns with many hard-won lessons from other collaborative efforts within peacebuilding and other sectors. Consensus is broad at this point that collaboration rarely emerges organically, that it must be facilitated and incentivized. So, for instance, networks need a secretariat, communities of practice need a facilitator, consortiums need a lead, and so on.

***Collaboration rarely emerges organically...it must be facilitated and incentivized.***

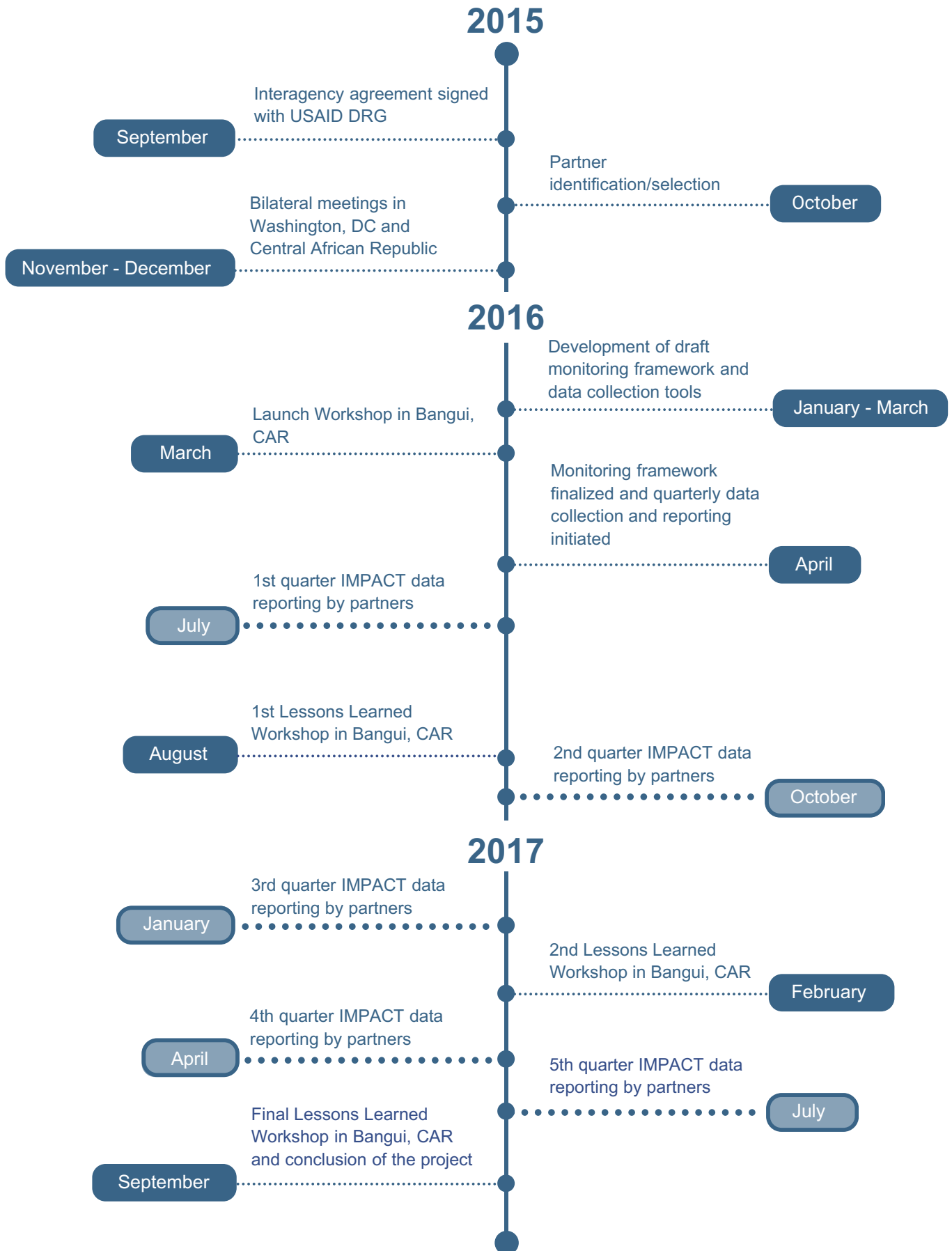
## IMPACT-CAR

The IMPACT-CAR initiative was launched for many of the same reasons that the collective impact approach has garnered so much attention. There is a clear understanding across many sectors, including peacebuilding, that projects do not necessarily add up to broader social change and therefore that more effective collaborative strategies are required. IMPACT-CAR sought to test a particular type of collaboration model centered on shared monitoring and reporting.

### Launch

In September 2015, USAID’s Center for Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, provided USIP with funding to launch IMPACT-CAR. The initiative sought to develop and implement a shared monitoring and data collection framework for peacebuilding programs supported by the CAR Peacebuilding Consortium.<sup>14</sup> As the effort progressed, the initiative also sought to include, where feasible, other US government-funded peacebuilding projects (for a complete timeline of the IMPACT-CAR initiative, see figure 1). Eventually, seven projects were included in the initiative (see table 2).

Figure 1. IMPACT-CAR Initiative Timeline



**Table 2. Initiative Projects**

Implementer	Project	Donor
Search for Common Ground	Zo Kwe Zo (People are People)	USAID CMM
Search for Common Ground	Bolstering Judicial and Social Accountability	State DRL
TetraTech	The Property Rights and Artisanal Diamond Development II (PRADD II)	USAID DCHA
Mercy Corps	Advancing Solutions for Peace through Intercommunity Reconciliation and Engagement (ASPIRE)	USAID CMM
CIPP Consortium led by CRS, with Aegis Trust, Islamic Relief Worldwide, la Plateforme des Confessiones Religieuses de Centrafrique, and World Vision International	CAR Interfaith Peacebuilding Partnership (CIPP)	USAID DRG
US Institute of Peace	Supporting the Foundation of a Peaceful Transition in the Central African Republic	USAID DRG
International Republican Institute	CAR Elections Consortium	State DRL

Notes: CMM = Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation. DCHA = Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance. DRG = Center for Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. DRL = Department of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.

IMPACT-CAR built on earlier initiatives that sought to develop shared monitoring and evaluation processes.<sup>15</sup> The IMPACT initiative was launched in 2014 to this end. Earlier initiatives focused on collection of programs defined by a particular approach, such as dispute resolution training or facilitated dialogue. IMPACT-CAR was the first IMPACT initiative to focus on a geographic area.

The terms agreed on in the agreement between USAID and USIP were deliberately vague, reflecting the pilot nature of the project and an acknowledgment from both sides that the approach would have to evolve organically. The initial language referenced “creating an avenue to develop shared learning about the most effective strategies for peacebuilding in CAR, and further develop the body of knowledge on what works in demonstrating impact on a broader, more systemic level.” The seven projects included all of those funded by the US government and implemented by international NGOs in fiscal year 2016.

Outreach to each of the funding agencies helped create buy-in for the effort. All of the projects had already been funded and were moving forward. Regardless, and despite the fact that the IMPACT effort added an element to their programming they had not planned on, all of the donors agreed to participate. The outreach efforts of USAID’s Center for Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, which funded IMPACT, was crucial to secure this buy-in. USAID was able to conduct outreach on a donor-to-donor level in a way that likely would not have been possible by USIP. The lesson here is that it is important to ensure an initiative has the early support of one to two important donors, who can then conduct outreach to additional donors. The primary motivation for donors to participate was to be able to demonstrate some form of larger impact or to learn more about how this could be done.

The support of the donors, not surprisingly, was key to engaging participation by the implementers. However, in follow-up discussions with implementers, they also identified several additional motivations for participating in the IMPACT process. Chief among these was a stated need to better understand what other implementers working in the same space were doing, what difficulties they were facing, and how to avoid making the same mistakes in their own programming. Another common reason offered was to be able to see how an organization’s efforts stacked up against others. This was considered healthy competition among some partners. One remarked that participation in a large meta-analysis had been an effective marketing tool with donors, and that the donor community values organizations that are transparent, accountable, and contributing to the larger field of practice.

***The primary motivation for donors to participate was to be able to demonstrate some form of larger impact or to learn more about how this could be done.***

## Shared Monitoring and Data-Collection Framework

The process of developing the shared monitoring, data-collection, and reporting framework started in the fall of 2015 with bilateral meetings in Washington, DC. Subsequent meetings in both Washington and Bangui led to the development and refinement of a shared monitoring, data-collection, and reporting framework. Data collection began in April 2016 and was conducted on a quarterly basis through August 2017. The IMPACT team of a part-time coordinator in CAR and a program officer in Washington aggregated and analyzed the data and reported to the partners quarterly. Concurrent partner meetings in Washington and in Bangui allowed for in-depth discussions about the process and the reports.

The framework was derived from the project design documents from the seven implementers, including their proposals, performance-management plans, project-monitoring frameworks, and so on. Based on this review, shared outcomes and shared indicators were identified and used to construct the framework. For the most part, creating these shared outcomes and indicators involved finding existing areas of commonality and creating a shared language. However, some new indicators were added either to all the projects or to some of the projects to bring them into alignment with the others. In discussions with the implementers, it became clear they were open to synchronizing and creating alignment among the existing frameworks, wary but open to adding one or two new indicators, but opposed to creating any kind of new indicator frameworks. This is not surprising given that these projects had been approved and funded based on the existing monitoring frameworks.

Two methods were used. For the quantitative part of the framework, shared indicators were developed against which to collect data. For the qualitative, more open-ended questions were developed based on the Most Significant Change approach.<sup>16</sup> Answers to these questions were then coded in part to assess progress against the shared outcomes. All the partners contributed data on the quantitative indicators and the qualitative questions, but various parts of the framework were not relevant for some of the implementers.

### *Quantitative*

To illustrate this process for the quantitative component of the framework, the example of social cohesion is useful. A key goal that emerged from the project design document review was to strengthen social cohesion at the community level. Based on this shared goal, a framework of shared outcomes and indicators was developed to facilitate shared quantitative reporting (see table 3 for an example).<sup>17</sup>

### *Qualitative*

In addition to the quantitative reporting, the implementing partners would answer five questions based on the most significant change over the previous quarter:

- in people's behavior in the target community or communities,
- in behavior among targeted government officials or national-level institutions,
- to programming,
- reflecting an opportunity or area in need of improvement for the project, and
- to the operating environment.

Answers to these questions were organized and synthesized using the overall IMPACT framework and then reported to the implementing partners. Moreover, important unintended outcomes were identified through this process, such as partners contributing to the safe return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and providing a platform for marginalized groups to be included in the political process.



**Table 3. Examples of Community Cohesion Programming Outcomes and Indicators**

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Outcome 3: Increase the capacity of institutions and individuals to implement local peacebuilding interventions.

Indicator 3.1— Number of individuals trained in [mediation, dialogue facilitation, peacebuilding initiatives, peace education, vocational skills, and trauma healing].

Indicator 3.2—Number of relevant activities carried out by trained individuals or institutions.

Indicator 3.3—Percentage of trained individuals demonstrating increased capacity on topics of training [mediation, dialogue facilitation, peacebuilding initiatives, peace education, vocational skills, and trauma healing].

Outcome 4: Improve intergroup relationships to address violence across lines of division.

Indicator 4.1—Number of individuals reached through intergroup activities—or intragroup activities aimed at setting the stage for intergroup interaction—carried out or supported by trained individuals or organizations.

Indicator 4.2—Number of community challenges (disputes) engaged in and resolved by US government-trained individuals or organizations.

Indicator 4.3—Percentage change in number of respondents reporting positive interactions between conflicting parties.

Indicator 4.4—Percentage of individuals reporting a change in the perception of the other group.

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## ***Reporting and Results***

Reporting of results began in June 2016. For each quarter, implementing partners sent answers to the qualitative questions and a data-collection template containing all relevant quantitative data from their activities to the IMPACT team. The data was cleaned, aggregated, analyzed, and shared with the partners in quarterly reports. Funders were also briefed on the results within the quarterly reports on request.

Figure 2 provides illustrative results based on five quarters of shared data collection from April 1, 2016, to July 31, 2017, and organized by the shared goals and outcomes from the IMPACT-CAR framework. More complete results are available; this section presents illustrative results to provide both a clearer picture of the kind of reporting IMPACT-CAR was able to produce and its limitations.

## ***Remarks***

Figure 2 makes it clear that IMPACT-CAR was able to aggregate reporting of outputs, not outcomes. This was less than the program's initial ambitions but largely the result of the timing of the IMPACT-CAR launch—during the implementation rather than the design phase. Because the projects were designed independently by different organizations and for different donors, they were not focused enough either thematically or geographically to allow for truly aggregated outcome-level reporting. The program did succeed, however, in creating a shared data-collection and reporting system at the output level. This allowed implementers to report on the scale and scope of their combined programs—a significant and important achievement.

The aggregation of output data also created opportunities for different kinds of analysis, such as a more meaningful demographic analysis of training participants along religious and gender lines. Within individual projects, the sample of participants was too small to enable claims about demographic differences. Including a larger sample gathered from across all the partners allowed differences in how demographic groups responded to the programming to emerge more clearly.

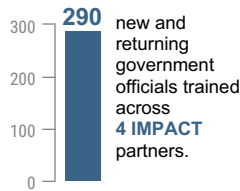
Discussions with implementers make it clear that the IMPACT-CAR framework and the results it produced provided ongoing opportunities for shared learning. First, the consistent and timely reporting provided a tool for situational awareness, answering the question of what others are doing when and where. Second, the framework provided a common frame of reference and a common vocabulary to structure conversations and learning sessions among

Figure 2. Selected IMPACT Results



## National Level Engagement

**Outcome:** Strengthen capacity of national institutions to build on the outcomes of the political transition process



**Training Topics included:**

- Institutional Management
- Restitution Methodology
- Strategic Communication
- Early Warning Systems
- SSR/DDR
- Social Cohesion
- Political Transition
- Community Security

**Trained officials ranged from:**

- deputy ministers in the national assembly,
- to mid-level Civil Servants,
- to local-level officials and security forces.

**Outcome:** Strengthen capacity of national institutions to engage civil society/amplify citizen voices in national policy discussions



131 community activities created direct engagement between government officials and community members.



On 101 occasions civil society organizations supported by IMPACT implementers engaged with government officials.



A National Coordination Committee of Marginalized Groups was established to support the inclusion of groups such as:

- Persons with disabilities
- Albinos
- IDPs
- LGBTQ

As part of the qualitative reporting, implementers reported the following:



"The increasing role of government officials in the prevention and peaceful management of conflicts is an important development in our project sites. We engaged local authorities in the development of an Early Warning System. As a result, a reconciliation commission was set up at the local level, and headed by the Prefect of Nana Mambéré. This commission organizes field missions to raise community awareness of tolerance and peace, and implement intercommunity micro-dialogues in order to mitigate emerging conflicts. In return, the authorities benefit from the trust of the communities."

## Community Cohesion Programming

**Outcome:** Increase the capacity of individuals and communities at the community level to implement peacebuilding activities



1275 new and returning community members trained on a wide range of topics.



Data identified a statistical difference in self-reported knowledge gain from training between **Christian and Muslim participants**.



No statistical difference was identified across age or gender lines.

136\* community activities were implemented by trained community members after their capacity-building session(s). (\* 47% of the total number)

IMPACT partners implemented 290 community events, including:



Participatory arts events



Football tournaments



Public awareness events

and other meetings and workshops that reached an estimated 132,000 people.

**Outcome:** Improve inter-group relationships as means to addressing violence across lines of division

As part of the qualitative reporting, implementers reported the following:



One partner, through the development of an **Early Warning System and Peace Committees**, created an environment of security that allowed for the return of Muslims that had sought shelter in Cameroonian refugee camps.



More than 250 Muslims have successfully returned to their homes in the Hausa district in Nana-Mambere.



"One partner played an important role in returning Muslim mining traders and their families from the Church of Carnot. The partner facilitated dialogues separately with the Anti-Balaka (Christian militia), stakeholders in the mining industry, and the displaced Muslim traders, and then brought them together for a joint dialogue. This process contributed to the safe return of 800 Muslim IDPs. The return had immediate impact on the mining economy, as the experienced traders moved back into the sector and economic activity grew. Not surprisingly, however, the return did lead to significant tension as the competition in the sector increased."

the implementers. Third, and relatedly, implementers used the reports as a starting point to discuss common approaches and strategies for peacebuilding in CAR, particularly at the operational level. It provided a framework for implementers to ask basic but important questions. What strategies create better gender representation at workshops? Or what approaches create more attendance at public events? The quarterly reports also formed the basis for in-person lessons learned meetings with partners in Bangui. On three occasions during and directly after concluding the project, partners engaged in more granular conversations about what the data was showing and how this information could guide programming.

Finally, the data collected should be judged not only on how it has been used to date, but also on how it might be leveraged in the future, particularly as part of evaluation processes. Evaluators, particularly evaluators tasked with assessing the aggregate impact of multiple programs, often struggle if basic information on program implementation and basic monitoring data does not exist. Thus, the data collected by IMPACT-CAR would be an invaluable foundation for future evaluators tasked with assessing peacebuilding programming in CAR.

## The Way Forward

The two basic insights from the review of the collective impact field were that it is important to collaborate throughout the project cycle and that some entity or organization to fulfill the backbone function, one that is empowered and resourced to drive the collaboration forward, is needed. These lessons were reinforced by the IMPACT-CAR experience.

### *Collaboration throughout the Project Cycle*

One of the more serious challenges for IMPACT-CAR was that collaboration began at the implementation rather than the design stage. First, individual projects were designed not under a common framework, agenda, or strategy but instead by various US government agencies. Projects ranged from artisanal diamond mining to interreligious reconciliation to capacity-building in state institutions.

Such a shared peacebuilding strategy would have allowed a shared monitoring and evaluation strategy to be developed from the beginning of the design phase. Instead, USIP worked to reverse engineer a monitoring framework and data-collection strategy based on existing project designs. The framework allowed for identification and articulation of shared outcomes at a broad level, enabled synchronization of data collection, and helped provide a common reference point for instructive conversations among implementers. It did not, however, prove focused enough or cohesive enough to allow for measuring or reporting at an aggregate level on shared outcomes. IMPACT-CAR is only one example, but creating a framework robust enough to allow this kind of reporting requires a shared peacebuilding strategy and monitoring and evaluation system during the design phase.

The projects were geographically as well as thematically dispersed. Programming took place in the north, west, and central regions of CAR. Part of the shared agenda for most collective impact projects is a geographic focus, such as reducing obesity in Somerville, Massachusetts.<sup>18</sup> As is often the case with international development projects, the geographic unit for the CAR programming was the country as a whole. This made it difficult for the dispersed projects to create any kind of critical mass, again hindering the ability to report on aggregated impact at an outcome level.

Second, because IMPACT-CAR was not designed as a collective impact initiative from the onset, many important systems and processes were not in place to facilitate collaboration on implementation and measurement. Much of the feedback from implementers related to this point. They noted, for instance, that no funding supported the collaborative effort and

***This kind of reporting requires a shared peacebuilding strategy and monitoring and evaluation system during the design phase.***

that the well-documented problems of overtaxed field staff and high levels of staff turnover undercut their ability at times to fully engage with IMPACT-CAR.

In addition, individuals within the implementing organizations that supported IMPACT-CAR sometimes struggled to socialize the initiative throughout the rest of the organization. Such socialization is necessary to ensure that headquarters program staff, monitoring and evaluation teams, and field staff all support the collaborative effort and work in an integrated way. Such socialization would have been easier had IMPACT-CAR been integrated into the project design efforts of the organizations at the earliest stages because design activity typically requires more intense involvement from other teams throughout the implementer's organization, especially headquarters.

Important lessons were also learned about collective impact initiatives during the implementation phase. One of the core related success factors of the collective impact framework is continuous communication. The experience of IMPACT-CAR confirmed the need for collaboration between implementers to be facilitated on an ongoing basis. As is typical of peacebuilding projects in fragile environments, nothing went exactly to plan. The launch of certain projects was delayed, other projects needed to be adjusted in response to rapidly changing circumstances on the ground, and so on. IMPACT-CAR needed to be flexible. Instead of simply reporting on aggregated outputs each quarter, the project ended up providing more reporting on the context than originally planned in order to make sense of the data, for instance, when an implementer had been delayed in launching particular programming or an implementer needed to pause programming because of security concerns. A key lesson is that the project would have been more effective with a full-time staff person on the ground to facilitate collaboration and communication on a day-to-day basis.

In the past, donors sometimes attempt a "set it and forget it" model of collaboration, in which they develop a strategy for a country or region, initiate projects in line with that strategy, but then do little to foster collaboration during project implementation. Such a strategy is unlikely to be successful.

Such a lesson is important because the peacebuilding field as a whole is slowly, and haltingly, trying to move away from rigid, inflexible project designs and toward a model of programming more flexible and more adaptive to rapidly changing conditions on the ground. Efforts to strengthen collective impact-type initiatives in the peacebuilding field should be aligned with this shift, as opposed to creating rigid, inflexible program models.

### ***The Backbone Function***

When IMPACT-CAR was launched, the USIP team did not explicitly identify itself as a backbone organization because it was not familiar with the term. It envisioned itself as a facilitator of a collaborative process and as the project unfolded ended up playing an almost prototypical backbone-organization role. It also became clear that it was well positioned to play that role.

Despite explicit reference to a backbone organization in the collective impact framework, what is referred to is really a function to be fulfilled. This function could be fulfilled by individuals in any involved entity, such as an implementing organization, a donor, or a separate backbone organization. Why was USIP well positioned to serve this function?

First, USIP was not the donor, but had a close relationship with and was well respected by the funding agencies. Interestingly, nothing in the collective impact literature mentions donors serving as the backbone organization. However, in consultations with the implementing partners, consensus was strong that, given the current structure of donor organizations, it would be difficult for donors to play this role. Implementing partners noted

that donors are not organized to play an ongoing facilitative role. They are organized for the most part to fulfill their core functions of disbursing money and ensuring compliance, and currently have neither the capacity nor the expertise for this kind of sustained engagement with implementers.

However, even if donors did build the internal capacity to fulfill the backbone function, significant challenges would still arise as the result of the power dynamics between donors and implementers. These dynamics almost always make open and honest conversations about lessons learned and transparency around less-than-successful initiatives more difficult. This is in line with critiques of the collective impact approach that it suffers from being a top-down approach, as opposed to a community-driven approach. This problem would be exacerbated if the donor served as the backbone organization as well.

Although USIP was not a donor, it is also not an implementing NGO. It does have field programs but does not compete directly for funding with the other implementing organizations that had programs in CAR. Again, based on feedback from implementers, it seems that USIP as an organization was close enough to being an NGO to be seen as credible and knowledgeable enough about field programs to gain the trust of field staff, but distinct enough from the implementers to not raise significant concerns about sharing information with or being evaluated by a competitor.

One challenge that did emerge reinforces this conclusion. USIP was implementing a peacebuilding program distinct from the IMPACT-CAR effort. This project was brought into the IMPACT-CAR framework, but doing so caused questions to be raised by both USAID and the implementing partners about conflicts of interest and whether it made sense for USIP to be in some way judging its own program. USIP's programmatic efforts and IMPACT work were kept clearly separate, but in retrospect it would have been better for IMPACT-CAR had USIP played only the backbone-organization role.

Certain challenges relevant to future projects emerged during the project. First, as noted, one of the core success factors for collective impact efforts is continuous communication. Although the IMPACT-CAR team in Washington communicated regularly, both the team and the implementers agree that having a full-time staff person for the initiative based in Bangui would have improved the initiative. Such a staff person would have created the ability to provide more continuous hands-on support to the field staff of the implementing organizations and troubleshoot any problems that emerged, particularly in regard to data collection.

Not having staff on the ground also made it difficult to engage Central Africans in the IMPACT-CAR initiative on a broader level. Most of the team communication was with the implementing organizations, as opposed to other stakeholders within CAR. This is important given that a key critique of the collective impact approach is that it is too top-down, too driven by donors and large organizations and too little by community members. A strong local presence to play the backbone function could bring important Central African stakeholders into the coordination process in an ongoing way. This could have, for example, helped ensure that the data were meaningful and relevant, that programming and data collection remained aligned with local and national priorities within CAR, and that results were shared and leveraged by both local and international actors.

A final challenge that emerged was the lack of resources for independent data collection. Discussion in the collective impact literature is scant on whether a backbone organization should undertake independent data collection. As IMPACT-CAR unfolded, however, it became clear that a much better picture of the combined impact of the various projects might have been obtained had data been collected independently and then layered on top of project-level monitoring and data collection. Because the initiative relied on self-reported data from the implementers, data collection could not be too complex, too time consuming, or

***A strong local presence to play the backbone function could bring important...stakeholders into the coordination process in an ongoing way.***

too resource intensive. Supplementing this data with, for instance, independently collected data on levels of violence or intergroup attitudes would have improved the ability of IMPACT-CAR to make credible claims about outcome-level impact.

Based on these lessons, if we were to launch a new collaborative peacebuilding initiative, one designed to ensure projects had collective impact and could demonstrate that impact, how would we redesign our roadmap to ensure more effective collaboration? How would we structure the initiative? How would we overcome the well-known challenges?

## Recommendations

**A shared agenda.** A new initiative would need to create a shared agenda among the participants focused on a concrete problem, not driven by the structure of the donor organization. As noted, IMPACT-CAR operated at the country level because of USAID's organizational structure, not because it was determined that it was the best scale for a collaborative effort. This created projects that were both too dissimilar and too geographically dispersed for an effective collective impact effort.

The initiative could still be based on a donor's country strategy, but the organizers should pick a specific problem within the country strategy on which to focus a collaborative effort. In CAR, for example, the focus could be reducing violence in a specific geographical area or reintegration of IDPs in a geographical area identified as particularly vulnerable to renewed conflict. Once the problem is identified, the initiative could develop a shared analysis, a shared strategy grounded in an agreed theory of change, a shared measurement strategy among the implementers, and so on.

**A flexible collaboration platform managed by a backbone organization.** IMPACT-CAR struggled at times to adjust to the dynamic, rapidly changing environment of CAR. Projects began at different times, or were paused because of conditions on the ground. Staff turnover was high and donor staff were not in the country. Outbreaks of violence disrupted activities. Such an environment will be the norm for any collaborative peacebuilding effort. The goal of a new initiative should therefore be to build a flexible platform for collaboration. Any kind of approach that creates a rigid, inflexible framework will not succeed.

The collaboration platform, managed by a dedicated backbone organization, would have dedicated staff located in the same area where programming is taking place. Staff would constantly be monitoring the situation and adjusting the strategy of the overall collaborative initiative. They would be in continuous communication with the implementers to understand the challenges being faced regarding implementation and data collection. The backbone would maintain robust knowledge management systems to enable information sharing across implementers and to enable smoother transitions for inevitable staffing changes. On a related note, the platform would create clear onboarding processes for new staff of existing implementers, or new implementers undertaking relevant programming in the area. The backbone organization should also have expertise in managing collaborative initiatives. Ideally, it should also not implement peacebuilding programs in the same area as the collaboration.

**Incentives to join.** During IMPACT-CAR, the team was somewhat surprised at times at the willingness of implementers to participate in the initiative. Nonetheless, implementers communicated clearly that for deeper collaboration more incentives to participate need to be created. They mentioned training for field staff in particular. To meet this need, the collaboration platform could include an ongoing training service. This could be handled in a low-key, low-cost way, such as creating an Evenings with Excel series where field staff could drop in to improve their skills.

The implementers also mentioned funding to offset the costs of collaboration. Donors should acknowledge and resource the demands that increased collaboration create. In addition, donors should consider creating ongoing funding windows—such as funding competitions for specific types of activities throughout the collaboration initiative. This would not only create incentives for implementers to continue to engage, but would also build flexibility into the projects. These windows could be planned for at the outset or created by new donors through the outreach and advocacy efforts of the backbone organization.<sup>19</sup>

**Independent data collection and evaluation.** An important collective good a backbone organization can provide is to collect data independently of any particular project. No matter how strong the shared data collection and measurement efforts of implementers are, there will always be opportunities for independent data collection to fill gaps and create common insights. For IMPACT-CAR, for example, both community-level surveys to assess changes at a community level, and more systematic efforts to match program location information with geocoded violent incident data would have provided important additional insights. Similarly, the stronger the shared data collection efforts of implementers, the more that this data could be leveraged by evaluators tasked with assessing the combined impact of the programs as a whole.

Any new initiative should therefore ensure that the backbone organization has the resources to conduct independent data collection. Such efforts should be designed in collaboration with the implementing organization. Donors in the effort, again in collaboration with the backbone organization, should also plan for independent evaluations to be undertaken at various points during the initiative.

**Upward accountability and sideways learning.** Inherent to the monitoring and evaluation field is a healthy tension between processes designed to create accountability for program results and those to create learning about how results were created. In the end, IMPACT-CAR was less successful regarding accountability. It was not able to create a process that allowed the demonstration of results at an aggregate level upward to donors. However, based on consultations with implementers, it did successfully create learning sideways among the implementers.

According to the Collective Impact 3.0 article, participants in such initiatives “want measurement systems that (a) provide real-time feedback on the multiple outcomes expressed in their theory of change or strategy; (b) are manageable; (c) have robust processes for sensemaking and decision-making; and (d) can co-evolve with their ever-changing strategies.”<sup>20</sup> IMPACT-CAR achieved some of these objectives in part and the flexible collaboration platform described earlier should be designed with these objectives in mind. This kind of sideways learning within the collaboration is crucial for effective programming. In addition, however, new collaboration initiatives should also be capable of demonstrating results at the aggregate level to those outside the collaboration. Initiatives need to ensure that programs are adding up and be able to demonstrate that impact to donors and others.

One of the lessons from IMPACT-CAR is that a relatively low investment enables fostering improved coordination and learning among implementers in a particular area. An additional lesson is that a much more significant investment needs to be made to deepen that collaboration to the point that reporting on collective impact is possible.

Because a true collective impact initiative requires a significant investment in the backbone organization and in other aspects of the collaboration process, if collaborative initiatives are not able to demonstrate broader, aggregate impact, it is unlikely that donors will make the investments necessary to sustain collaborative initiatives. New collaboration initiatives should therefore be clear and intentional about what they are trying to accomplish.

If the goal is to foster sideways learning among implementers, a worthy goal in and of itself, the initiative should be clear to that effect. If the goal is to demonstrate that programs are adding up to have broader, aggregate impact, the initiative should be clear on that as well and ensure that it has the resources necessary to accomplish this more ambitious task.

## Conclusion

The experiences of the collective impact field generally and IMPACT-CAR specifically clarify two lessons that the peacebuilding field must learn to drive forward better collaboration initiatives in the future. First, collaboration must take place throughout the project cycle, from the early design stage to implementation and through shared measurement and evaluation. Second, a dedicated, resourced backbone organization is essential to continuously facilitate collaboration, adjust strategies as needed, provide incentives for participation, fill data collection gaps, and so on.

At the moment, fully fledged collective impact projects within the peacebuilding field are rare. Progress is being made on demonstrating collective impact in the peacebuilding field, however. The five recommendations described are drawn from the experience of various efforts and the practical experience of implementing IMPACT-CAR. Together they suggest a way forward for future endeavors. The next step is to develop a pilot initiative focused on a tangible peacebuilding problem in a specific geography that builds on all the lessons learned to date on making collective impact initiatives successful. Such a pilot is necessary to persuasively demonstrate first that collective impact initiatives are possible in the peacebuilding field, and that peacebuilding programs can add up to achieve broader impact.

## Notes

1. John Kania and Mark Kramer, "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 9, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 36, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective\\_impact](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact).
2. IMPACT-CAR was not designed using the collective impact framework because the project team was not aware of the framework at that time.
3. The case studies, success stories, and much of the commentary and critique can be accessed through the online Collective Impact Forum (see [www.fsg.org/collective-impact-forum](http://www.fsg.org/collective-impact-forum)).
4. Much of this commentary and critique can be accessed through the online Collective Impact Forum (see [www.fsg.org/collective-impact-forum](http://www.fsg.org/collective-impact-forum)).
5. Mark Cabaj and Liz Weaver, "Collective Impact 3.0: An Evolving Framework for Community Change," Tamarack Institute, 2016, <https://collectiveimpactforum.org/sites/default/files/Collective%20Impact%203.0.pdf>.
6. See "Humanity United: Learning to Respond Before Risk Becomes Crisis," *Peace and Security Funding Index*, 2015, <http://peaceandsecurityindex.org/spotlights/humanity-united-learning-to-respond-before-risk-becomes-crisis>.
7. See Jon Bennett, Jups Kluykens, James Morton, and Derek Poate, *Mid-Term Evaluation of the Joint Donor Team in Juba, Sudan* (Oslo: Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, 2009), <http://itad.com/reports/mid-term-evaluation-of-the-joint-donor-team-in-juba-sudan>.
8. Catholic Relief Services, "GAIN Peacebuilding Indicators," May 3, 2010, [www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/gain-peacebuilding-indicators](http://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/gain-peacebuilding-indicators). GAIN is an acronym for globally accepted indicators.
9. RSI Consulting, "Security and Stability," [http://rsiafghanistan.com/security\\_and\\_stability.php](http://rsiafghanistan.com/security_and_stability.php).
10. US Department of State, "Standard Foreign Assistance Indicators," [www.state.gov/f/indicators](http://www.state.gov/f/indicators).
11. See Jack Froude and Michael Zanchelli, "What Works in Facilitated Dialogue Programming," Special Report no. 407 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2017).
12. For an overview of this project and to reference the set of cumulative impact reports, see CDA, "Cumulative Impacts of Peacebuilding Efforts," <http://cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/cumulative-impacts-peacebuilding-efforts>.
13. See Shiloh Turner, Kathy Merchant, John Kania, and Ellen Martin, "Understanding the Value of Backbone Organizations in Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, July 17–20, 2012, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/understanding\\_the\\_value\\_of\\_backbone\\_organizations\\_in\\_collective\\_impact\\_1](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/understanding_the_value_of_backbone_organizations_in_collective_impact_1).
14. The CAR Peacebuilding Partnership, organized initially by USAID, is a public-private partnership among donors, private foundations, nongovernmental organizations, civil society, and government that supports locally led peacebuilding in the Central African Republic. Its goal is to ensure dedicated donor support for locally led peacebuilding and atrocity prevention efforts through a critical period of transition in CAR.
15. In 2010, USIP and the Alliance for Peacebuilding launched the Peacebuilding Evaluation Project, later the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium (PEC), which was designed to foster more effective collaboration among



donors and implementers on issues of monitoring and evaluation in peacebuilding. Initial IMPACT initiatives grew out of the efforts of the PEC.

16. For more information on the most significant change approach, see ODI, "Strategy Development: Most Significant Change," January 2009, [www.odi.org/publications/5211-msc-most-significant-change-monitoring-evaluation](http://www.odi.org/publications/5211-msc-most-significant-change-monitoring-evaluation).
17. The full IMPACT framework is available on request.
18. FSG, "Collective Impact Case Study: Shape Up Somerville," 2006, [www.fsg.org/publications/shape-somerville](http://www.fsg.org/publications/shape-somerville).
19. Turner et al., "Understanding the Value."
20. Cabaj and Weaver, "Collective Impact 3.0," 8.





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