

Pursuing Systemic Change

An Ethnographic Exploration of Collective Impact as Social In- novation Framework in the Pub- lic Sector

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Industrial PhD Dissertation
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English Abstract

This industrial PhD dissertation explores the potential of the social innovation framework Collective Impact within the context of the Danish welfare state. Using the Danish Collective Impact initiative MedVind i Østerbyen as a case study, the research examines how the framework can enable systemic change and foster cross-sector collaboration. MedVind, a partnership between Esbjerg Municipality and Lauritzen Foundation, has created an alliance with over fifty local actors to improve the lives of children and youth in a socioeconomically challenged area, through the five-element Collective Impact framework.

Situated at the intersection of social innovation in the public sector, systemic change, and collective impact, the research addresses the overarching question: What is the potential of the Collective Impact framework for social innovation in a Danish public sector context? This is explored through three themes, each focusing on distinct aspects of Collective Impact I highlighted by literature and found to be actors primary experienced potentials: the long-term perspective, the backbone organization, and the pursuit of systemic change. Based on these three, the dissertation contributes to existing knowledge on social innovation in the public sector in three articles. The research employs an exploratory approach guided by ethnographic methodology, leveraging the industrial PhD format to engage closely with the case organization. Data was generated through ethnographic fieldwork, placing the researcher along-side the alliance actors, participating in the daily life at the alliance backbone office.

The dissertation consists of three articles and a kappa text and contributes to the scholarly conversation on social innovation in three key ways: (1) by providing empirical evidence of systemic change as practically engaged in by social innovators, particularly in the context of welfare state dynamics and the adaptation of Collective Impact frameworks, (2) by furthering our understanding of how the public sector can engage in, lead, and enable social innovation, with a focus on the backbone organization's role in driving systemic change, and (3) by examining the barriers and enablers of transformative mindset shifts in public sector collaborations. These contributions are significant as they bridge the gap between theoretical models of social innovation and their practical applications in governance contexts, offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners.

The first article examines how the welfare state context and public sector participation shape Collective Impact adaptation, finding that public sector involvement both strengthens and complicates collaboration. While the public sector anchoring provides sustainability and legitimacy, the shared agenda is found to complicate public sector actors, with a distinct municipal expected accountability. The second article focuses on the backbone organization's role in facilitating systemic change. By integrating theory of systemic change and its division of levels by visibility, and theory of invisible labour, it finds that the invisibility systemic changes are enabled through equally invisible backbone actions. The third article investigates how systemic change is pursued through mindset shifts, revealing challenges related to the distinct barriers of perceptions of being data-driven and the lack of strategic tools, processes and language for engaging in systemic change.

Overall, these empirical findings suggest, that if we are to engage further with systemic change as part of social innovation within the public sector and addressing of large societal challenges, even at local level, Collective Impact offers a viable structure to do so, but could benefit from: further engagement in systemic thinking, acknowledging, and valuing the invisible emotional work that goes into enabling systemic change and having courage to let organizations be slow and relational.

Dansk Resumé

Denne erhvervs-ph.d.-afhandling undersøger potentialet i rammeværktøjet Collective Impact inden for en dansk velfærdsstatskontekst. Med udgangspunkt i det danske Collective Impact initiativ MedVind i Østerbyen undersøger afhandlingen, hvordan Collective Impact kan muliggøre systemiske forandringer og fremme tværsektorielt samarbejde. MedVind er et partnerskab mellem Esbjerg Kommune og Lauritzen Fonden, der har skabt en alliance med over 50 lokale aktører, for at forbedre livsvilkårene for børn og unge i et socioøkonomisk udfordret område, gennem Collective Impact's fem grundelementer.

Afhandlingen placerer sig i krydsfeltet mellem social innovation i den offentlige sektor, systemiske forandringer og Collective Impact. Det centrale forskningsspørgsmål lyder: Hvad er potentialet i Collective Impact-rammeværket som redskab for social innovation i en dansk offentlig sektor-kontekst? Dette spørgsmål udforskes gennem tre temaer, der fremhæves i både litteraturen og blandt aktørernes oplevelser af potentialet: det langsigtede perspektiv, backbone-organisationens rolle og en stræben efter systemiske forandringer. Undersøgelsen anvender en eksplorativ tilgang gennem etnografisk metode, hvor ph.d.-kandidatens placering som erhvervsforsker muliggør tæt samarbejde med case-organisationen. Data blev indsamlet gennem etnografisk feltarbejde, hvor forskeren fulgte alliancens aktører og deltog i hverdagslivet på backbone-kontoret.

Afhandlingen består af tre artikler og en rammetekst, og bidrager til forskningslitteraturen om social innovation på tre væsentlige måder: (1) ved at levere empirisk evidens for, hvordan systemiske forandringer praktisk udføres af social innovatorer, særligt i velfærdsstaten og tilpasningen af Collective Impact rammeværket, (2) ved at udvide vores forståelse af, hvordan den offentlige sektor kan deltage i, lede og muliggøre social innovation, med fokus på backbone-organisationens rolle i systemiske forandringer, og (3) ved at undersøge barrierer og muligheder for transformative mentale skift i offentlige sektor samarbejder. Disse bidrag er betydningsfulde, da de bygger bro mellem teoretiske modeller for social innovation og deres praktiske anvendelse i styringskontekster, og tilbyder værdifulde indsigter for både forskere og praktikere.

Den første artikel undersøger, hvordan velfærdsstatens kontekst og den offentlige sektors deltagelse påvirker tilpasningen af Collective Impact. Her påvises, at den

offentlige sektors involvering både styrker samarbejdet gennem legitimitet og bæredygtighed, men samtidig skaber kompleksitet ved at lade det fælles agenda være anset som være tilhørende specifikke kommunale forvaltninger og institutioner. Den anden artikel fokuserer på backbone-organisationens rolle i at facilitere systemiske forandringer. Gennem en kobling af teorier om systemiske forandringers synlighedsniveauer og teorier om usynligt arbejde viser studiet, at de systemiske forandringer ofte muliggøres gennem lige så usynlige handlinger i backbone-organisationen. Den tredje artikel undersøger, hvordan systemiske forandringer forfølges gennem mentale skift hos aktørerne. Artiklen identificerer udfordringer i at være data-drevet og en mangel på strategiske værktøjer, processer og sprog til at understøtte systemiske forandringer.

Samlet set peger de empiriske fund på, at Collective Impact kan være en effektiv struktur til at fremme systemiske forandringer som en del af social innovation i den offentlige sektor, selv i lokale kontekster. Dette kræver dog større engagement i systemisk tænkning, anerkendelse og værdsættelse af det usynlige følelsesmæssige arbejde, der ligger i at muliggøre systemiske forandringer, samt en styrkelse af værktøjer og sprog, der understøtter dette arbejde

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- PART ONE -

01 Introduction

01.01 Research Background and Motivation

This public industrial PhD dissertation takes its point of departure in a Danish Collective Impact initiative - MedVind i Østerbyen - with the aim of producing an ethnographic exploration of the potential of this social innovation framework in the Danish context.

Collective Impact, as a framework for social innovation, has found its way into the welfare state context through a door puffed open by the winds of a changing public management paradigm carried through by philanthropic foundations. It has been allowed inside based on the realization that continuous societal challenges are in need of new ways of addressing wicked problems and grand challenges. Accordingly, although the theoretical foundations of Collective Impact lie in the field of community development, this framework has come to represent a component of the zeitgeist concerning the need for the improved coordination of organizational efforts across various sectors, particularly from the perspective of the public sector.

01.01.01 Interest in Social Innovation in the Danish Public Sector

In light of the pressure that the welfare state currently faces due to the increasingly widespread issues of complexity and resource scarcity, which have been exacerbated by national and international crises, the public sector is seeking novel solutions and approaches that it can use to overcome societal challenges and wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1974). This situation has encouraged the public sector to search for innovative welfare contributions with a focus on cross-sector collaboration, particularly in light of the fact that these challenges can rarely be solved by the public sector alone (Aastvedt & Higdén, 2022; Bekkers et al., 2014; Bekkers & Tummers, 2018; Sørensen & Torfing, 2022).

This shift has guided the public sector to embrace social innovation more broadly, thereby triggering the development of innovative welfare contributions, approaches, and models. While innovation has traditionally been associated with the for-profit sector and identified as a tool for profit maximization, this notion has increasingly been incorporated into the nonprofit and public sectors in recent years. This transition has led to the emergence of a variety of new concepts, including public innovation, social innovation, and welfare innovation, which reflect the evolving landscape of the ways in which innovation is understood and applied in different contexts (Junge & Lustrup, 2014). Bekkers et al. (2014) claimed that “*the innovation journey on which the public sector in many western countries has embarked sails under a new flag, which is called ‘social innovation’*” (p. 223). Essentially, social innovation focuses on meeting social needs through social responses that cross sectoral and organizational boundaries, thereby generating societal change (Jessop et al., 2013; Moulaert, 2013; Mulgan, 2006; Voorberg et al., 2015).

Only two years before the research conducted for this dissertation began in 2020, the Danish government closed MindLab, a cross-governmental innovation lab that operated from 2002 to 2018. MindLab was one of the first public innovation labs worldwide, and it was established to foster innovative solutions to complex societal challenges through a human-centred design approach, collaboration, and cocreation across different sectors (Carstensen & Bason, 2012). MindLab operated across three ministries—the Ministry of Business and Growth, the Ministry of Employment, and the Ministry of Education—with the goal of generating new ideas and approaches that could be used to improve public services; however, it was shut down in 2018 because of government restructuring and shifting political priorities.

The closure of MindLab represented a shift in the Danish government's approach to public innovation that highlighted a broader realignment of priorities. However, while public sector innovation labs such as MindLab were being phased out, new models, specifically those pertaining to social innovation, began to gain traction at the international level, particularly in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. The British professor, innovator and change maker Hilary Cottam developed ‘Radical Help’ (Cottam, 2018), which represented a model and mindset for social change and revolution in the welfare state; this model was initially rooted in the British welfare system but has spread across Europe. Furthermore, Canadian researcher Jocelyn Bourgon developed a ‘new synthesis of public administration’ (Bourgon, 2017), which featured a new mindset that could inform novel strategies for welfare systems. Finally, John Kania and Mark Kramer developed the Collective Impact approach to the task of promoting large-scale social change on the basis of a

collaborative model and the mobilization of resources at the community level (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Despite the differences among these tools and approaches in terms of their origins and ideologies, these approaches are all rooted in the idea of promoting more collaboration across sectors and addressing the need for change, which can be viewed as ‘systemic’, ‘transformational’ or ‘radical’.

Another commonality among these approaches is also that they have all been incorporated into the public administration of various Danish municipalities and town halls, where they have challenged organizational hierarchies and facilitated experimentation with regard to ways of promoting welfare. These new social innovation movements can be identified as part of the largest paradigm shift in the Danish public sector towards New Public Governance (NPG), which has led to changes in or additions to some of the logics underlying the prevailing New Public Management (NPM) paradigm (Osborne, 2006; Hood, 1991). NPG is an empirically founded concept that unifies all of these tendencies in the public sector under the definition of a new management paradigm (Torfing et al., 2020) or governance philosophy (Torfing & Triantafillou, 2013). Co-creation among sectors is an important empirical tendency that can be defined as a tool in the context of NPG (Agger & Tortzen, 2015; Sorrentino et al., 2018)

01.01.02 Collective Impact as a Framework for Social Innovation

One municipality that has adopted such a novel approach is Esbjerg. In partnership with a Danish commercial philanthropic foundation, this municipality created a Collective Impact initiative—MedVind i Østerbyen—with the goal of ‘minimizing the consequences of child poverty’ in the socioeconomically challenged area of the Østerbyen. Building on the five-element framework of Collective Impact for alliance-driven social innovation, the municipality established a cross-sectoral alliance on the basis of a shared agenda, namely, that ‘all children and youth in Østerbyen find their way through education and into the job market’. This partnership was initiated by the philanthropic foundation, as this collaborative agenda is also relevant in the philanthropic landscape, thus leading the foundation to search for ways of catalysing social change.

The specific Collective Impact initiative in Esbjerg known as MedVind i Østerbyen has various meanings. It can be translated directly as ‘TailWind in the Eastern City.’

In a bike-loving nation such as Denmark, the meaning of tailwind should not be taken for granted on bike lanes—nor should it be ignored as a metaphor in life, such as when others can be helped by creating a tailwind for them. This name further incorporates a reference to the wind through the capitalization of the V in MedVind (i.e., med vind or ‘with wind’), which refers to the very windy west coast on which the city in which this community exists is located. The final meaning of this term pertains to the second translation of MedVind i Østerbyen ‘co-winning in the Eastern City’. In summary, the name of this Collective Impact initiative emphasizes its context-specific adaptation, community focus, and co-creational nature.

01.01.03 Transformative Social Innovation and System-Level Outcomes

As such, the Collective Impact framework serves as a best-practice approach in this context and can thus be used as a point of departure for social innovation that occupies the sweet spot between two social innovative agendas, namely, the philanthropic sector and the public sector, in relevant municipalities. In addition to the population-specific agenda and desired outcomes pertaining to the task of addressing specific social challenges in the affected neighbourhood, the initiators of this project also aspire to ‘break down municipal silos, challenge the continuous project-making and change the mindset of collaboration’. These goals correspond to the two levels at which the Collective Impact initiative operates: population-level outcomes and systemic change (Nichols et al., 2021; Panjwani et al., 2023). While social innovators prefer to speak of solutions, to close gaps and to solve problems, systemic change represents one aspect of social innovation that is specifically persistent in the context of Collective Impact, which adopts a more transformative perspective. The population-level outcomes of MedVind i Østerbyen are tracked by the initiative itself on the basis of data generated from the local school, within the municipality, and through externally conducted evaluations. However, this dissertation focuses on the second key outcome pursued by the initiative, i.e., systemic change. While the children and youth of Østerbyen are central to the goals of this initiative and the actors who participate in it, they remain largely beyond the scope of this research.

Systemic change occupies an increasingly key position in the current public discourse. Phrases such as ‘the failure of the welfare system’, ‘the system has failed’, and ‘we need less system’ are common in public conversations and debates concerning the welfare system in general, thus highlighting widespread dissatisfaction

with the ways in which existing ‘systems’ address societal needs. These calls for systemic reform indicate increasing recognition of the fact that isolated solutions or adjustments are insufficient and that comprehensive, systemic change is required to improve the ways in which society functions. In academia, this discursive trend has been conceptualized in terms of transformational change and systemic change. Scholars have argued that addressing wicked problems—i.e., complex, multifaceted issues such as inequality, climate change, and healthcare—requires not only policy reform but also a fundamental restructuring of systems at a fundamental level (Meadows, 2008; Westley et al., 2013). Systemic change involves shifts in power dynamics, governance structures, and mindsets, and it is increasingly viewed as necessary to promote sustainable social innovation (Nicholls et al., 2015)

This research seeks to identify what the ‘magic concept’ of social innovation might look like in practice and to determine whether Collective Impact can serve as a ‘magic method’ that can be used to achieve this goal. The concept is undoubtedly appealing; it can mobilize stakeholders, generate excitement, and build consensus regarding the idea that all children and youth deserve better futures. However, this situation also raises a question about what it means and looks like to engage in systemic change on the basis of Collective Impact?

This dissertation contributes to the growing body of research on systemic change in the context of social innovation by presenting an ethnographic analysis of how this form of change takes place, how it is enabled, and how it operates within organizations. Social innovation research cannot remain a detached, empirical exercise; it is both inevitable and beneficial for research to engage closely with practice (Mullan, 2006). The motivation underlying the industrial research project reported in this dissertation is rooted in the belief that research should extend beyond the scope of academia, thereby influencing industry and society with the goal of having impacts beyond the traditional confines of academic inquiry. Finally, in light of the metaphor of ‘wind’ that is used in the context of MedVind i Østerbyen, this dissertation explores both the tailwinds and the headwinds that impact the pursuit of systemic change in the context of social innovation, particularly with regard to a Collective Impact initiative that has been adapted to local conditions.

01.02 Research Questions and Aims

This thesis takes MedVind i Østerbyen as a starting point and explores the role of Collective Impact as a specific social innovation response to societal challenges in

the context of the Danish welfare state. It examines the potential of this framework to facilitate social innovation and systemic change. On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2023, it seeks to respond to the following research question:

What is the potential of the Collective Impact framework for social innovation in the Danish public sector?

As part of a review of the literature on Collective Impact (which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3) with the aim of exploring ‘potentials’, I also began conducting fieldwork with the goal of obtaining insights into the potentials of this framework as experienced by founders, backbone staff, alliance actors and other Danish practitioners of social innovation on the basis of Collective Impact (as discussed in detail in Chapter 4). On the basis of the literature and preliminary ethnographic insights, three primary ‘potentials’ were notable. These potentials became the basis for continued fieldwork and analysis and serve as the focal points of the three articles included in this dissertation, namely, the long-term perspective, the backbone organization, and a focus on systemic change. These investigations jointly contribute to the efforts of this thesis to respond to the overall research question, through the following sub-questions:

The first article	How does the context of the municipal sector in a welfare state affect the Collective Impact framework, and how do public sector actors participate in Collective Impact?
The second article	What backbone actions emerge in the cross-sector collaboration MedVind i Østerbyen and how do they enable social innovation for systemic change?
The third article	How is systemic change understood and pursued by social innovators working on the basis of Collective Impact?

To address these research questions, empirical data were collected via a variety of qualitative methods, which were organized under the methodological framework of organizational ethnography. I conducted fieldwork in the organization MedVind i Østerbyen, which served as the case organization for this research, with the goal of following their development, processes, and everyday work over a three-year period; during this fieldwork, I was an industrial PhD candidate employed by the organization. An iterative approach to fieldwork was used in this context, and a broad focus on 'the potential of Collective Impact in Denmark' guided the data collection process while simultaneously facilitating the inclusion of topics that were not considered beforehand.

The research approach mirrors the emerging public administration 'co-paradigm' in New Public Governance and the burgeoning relational turn in public administration (K. Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). Across these, multiple actors are expected to co-create knowledge as a means of mobilizing resources (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Torfing et al., 2020; Osborne 2010). Similarly, this research was conducted as part of an industrial PhD in close collaboration with the case organization, thus rendering me, i.e., the researcher, another actor in the network of actors who constitute the MedVind alliance. Although ethnography is not traditionally associated with more 'actionable' methodologies, such as participatory action research, it does involve 'participation' as a central component of fieldwork. Together these two, i.e., the ethnographic fieldwork methodology and the industrial PhD project, allowed me to engage with my informants and share with them the objective of increasing the wellbeing of children and young people in Østerbyen while simultaneously contributing to academic research concerning systemic change, the notion of collective impact and social innovation. An overview of the investigations and outputs of this thesis is presented in Figure 1.

01.03 Outline of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into three main parts. The first part includes, besides the previous introductory text, of a chapter concerning the empirical context of this dissertation, which introduces the reader to the research host and case. This is followed by a chapter on previous research on, and the theoretical backgrounds of, the notion of social innovation, the framework of Collective Impact and the theory of systemic change, which outlines the scientific arguments underlying the main research question pursued in this context by focusing on relevant studies that have informed my inquiry while simultaneously laying the foundation for a discussion of

the dissertation as a whole. The first part of the dissertation concludes with a chapter on the methodological journey involved in this research, including a presentation of the data collection and analytical strategies used in this research alongside reflections on researcher positionality.

The second part of the thesis presents three research articles, which constitute the main body of the dissertation. Each article contains a dominant research story that became evident during the course of the fieldwork and was identified as important in the analysis; one of these stories focused on ‘calendars’ and the idea of not being a project, another story focused on ‘cake’ and the celebration of government subsidiaries and the final story focused on ‘coffee’ and the invisible labour involved in social innovation. Each of these areas are explored on their own and can be read as such, but they contribute to the wider discussion and aim of this dissertation, which is to explore the potential of Collective Impact. The three research articles are:

1. Lindegaard, K. “We are not a project”: Reimagining Social Innovation in the Public Sector through Collective Impact? *Working paper*

A previous draft of this paper was presented at the PUBSIC (Innovation in Public Services and Public Policy) conference in 2024.

2. Lindegaard, K. Coffee-drinking change-making: The invisible work of systemic change in a Collective Impact backbone organization. Accepted to revise and resubmit in *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*

A previous draft of this paper was presented at the NEON Conference in 2023.

3. Lindegaard, K., Can courage be co-created? Pursuing systemic change in cross-sector collaboration. *Prepared for submission to Nordic Journal of Innovation in the Public Sector*

A previous draft of this paper was presented at the ESA RN22 & ISA TG04 Midterm Conference in 2023.

The final part of the dissertation concludes the work by summarizing the findings of all three papers and combining them to present a final discussion concerning the potentials associated with the research against the backdrop of the literature and theoretical positions presented in Chapter 2. In this final part, I also propose three

ways in which these potentials can be realized. In the concluding section of the dissertation, its main contributions and implications are highlighted alongside various remarks concerning the strengths and limitations of this research as well as directions for future research.

Figure 1 Overview of the Dissertation



02 The Empirical Research Setting

In this chapter, the empirical setting in which this study was conducted is presented. First, the host organization and the case of ‘MedVind i Østerbyen’ (hereafter MedVind) are described. Setting the scene in this manner can help the reader understand how the initiative came into existence, who its main stakeholders are and what its organizational structure is, thereby allowing the reader to obtain a sense of the local environment and the setting in which the fieldwork was conducted.

02.01 The Creation of MedVind i Østerbyen

In ethnographic studies, the notion of a "myth of creation" refers to the foundational stories that groups tell to explain their origins, values, and purpose (Atkinson, 2014; Van Maanen, 2011b). These stories are often retold, thereby shaping these groups' identities in a manner similar to stories of religious or mythological origins. The history of how MedVind came to be was told repeatedly within the initiative, similar to a mythic tale of the meeting between two characters in a story: *the foundation* and *the municipality*¹.

When other municipalities, foundations or cross-sectoral collaborations exhibited interest in the initiative or when the two characters presented themselves to possible collaborators and actors, the following story was told. In 2017, Lauritzen Fonden changed their ‘fundats’ to focus increasingly on children and culture as well as on long-term projects instead of, as the director noted, “just handing out money”. This process required a shift from traditional philanthropy, which is driven by grant applications, to a more strategic and catalytic form of operation (Warner, 2015) in light

¹ Translated from Danish by the author; the original terminology was ‘Fonden og Kommunen’

of the organization's increasing desire to become engaged, follow up with the projects it supported and offer people "help, insights, and expertise".

As this foundation was built on the basis of money earned from the Lauritzen Shipping Company, relevant actors sought places in the history of the company in which they could give back to local communities. In 1884, J. Lauritzen established a trading company in the newly built port of Esbjerg, and the company's first steamship was acquired in 1888. Although the company eventually moved its operations to Copenhagen, its historical ties to the west coast of the country remained.

After strategic and structural changes in these 'fundats', the story indicates that the choice was made to invest once again in the west coast, and members of the foundation thus knocked on the gate of the Town Hall in Esbjerg. With the goals of reestablishing themselves as a foundation and serving as pioneers with regard to new philanthropic methods, these members approached a possible partner whom they expected to be fundamentally different from themselves - namely, reluctant to innovate, slow in terms of processes and stuck in its ways (these prejudices were articulated by various members of the foundation, although they were later challenged). One municipal leader from the department of 'pedagogy and culture' (now known as children and culture) opened the door.

After this initial process of knocking on and opening doors, a period of relationship formation followed, which involved face-to-face meetings, visits back and forth between Esbjerg and Hellerup (which is located north of Copenhagen, where the foundation had its address), such that the right people could meet the right people, in the right room, and under the right circumstances. After the mutual expression of interest on the basis of the broad ambition known as 'let's do something good for children in Esbjerg experiencing poverty', which came to represent a shared purpose, a process of clarification followed: what should be done, for whom and with whom? To facilitate and assist in this process, an external partner SUS (Innovation Agency for Social Good) was brought in. The area in question, Østerbyen, was suggested (by the municipality) to be the main area of focus due to the corresponding socioeconomic data, which painted the picture of a challenged neighbourhood.

To reveal the 'possibilities and challenges' associated with this community, local actors from the public, private, and volunteer sectors were involved in this process with the goal of laying the foundation for a new form of collaboration in pursuit of increased social mobility in the community. In addition to the statistical data concerning the children mentioned previously, a small number of stories were repeated: children traveling to the grocery store as the only available weekend outing,

children reporting that they knew not to turn on the radiator when many bills were hanging on the refrigerator, and children going to school hungry and cold. These stories all focused on the idea of living in poverty in a country in which the public narrative maintains that poverty does not exist (Lesner, 2023).

Following this period of exploration, the municipality and foundation decided to embark on a partnership on the five-element framework of Collective Impact, in which was supported 12 years of shared funding for a backbone office. The Collective Impact framework was selected because this approach represented a new, interesting and inspiring way of working across sectors but with a local focus. A partnership agreement was drafted to define the responsibilities of the collaboration, the partner group was established, members were invited to the steering committee, a facilitating backbone secretariat was established, and backbone staff were hired.

The amount of detail provided in this context varies across different versions of the story depending on the audience. If relevant individuals are present in the room, the story is told by two of the characters in it - i.e., the person knocking on the door on behalf of the foundation and the person opening the door on behalf of the municipality, both of whom represent the partnership representants - and others who, as part of their daily work in the backbone, are referred to as the 'chairmanship'. If these individuals are not present, the story is told by backbone staff or members of the steering committee, including both people who were present during this process and people who were not. Everybody knows this story; it is an established myth of creation that is used to mobilize and onboard new partners and actors in the collaboration as well as to communicate regarding the initiative.

02.02 Community Context and Target Population

The municipality of Esbjerg is the 5th largest municipality among the 98 municipalities in Denmark. Denmark's public sector is highly decentralized to reflect the principle of subsidiarity, and it features a clear division of responsibilities among the state, regional and municipal political and administrative levels. This decentralization is a core feature of the Scandinavian welfare state, which is characterized by its comprehensive provision of services and its emphasis on equality, social security, and collaboration between citizens and the government. Municipalities play a primary role in the process of delivering welfare services, including healthcare (e.g., rehabilitation or home care), social services (e.g., care for elderly individuals or psychiatric services), primary education, and childcare. They are also responsible for

labour market policies that can support employment initiatives, economic development, environmental regulation, and the integration of refugees and immigrants through cultural and employment programmes. By managing local taxation, providing administrative services, and fostering public–private partnerships, municipalities operate as both service providers and community developers, thereby ensuring that welfare services are tailored to the unique needs of local populations.

Among the 115,000 citizens living in the municipality of Esbjerg, approximately 7600 live in Østerbyen, an area which is located east of the railroad that divides the centre of the city Esbjerg. The MedVind I Østerbyen initiative operates in this area. The target population of the initiative consists exclusively of children and youth in Østerbyen who are between the ages of 0 and 25 years. In a baseline study that was conducted in 2017 by a Danish evaluation agency on the basis of data that were drawn primarily from the community school that was viewed as the epicentre of the initiative, the following conclusions were drawn²:

- A total of 41% of the students at the community school felt lonely.
- A total of 45% of these students did not participate in any sports activities or physical exercise (in comparison with 23% of students in the rest of the municipality).
- A total of 13% of these students had an afterschool job (in comparison with 40% of students at other schools in the municipality).
- A total of 13% of these students received the lowest grade in or failed their Danish and mathematics classes.
- A total of 28% of the parents of these students received support from the government.
- A total of 65% of these students had started further education 15 months after finishing their K-12 education (in comparison with 89% of students in the municipality as a whole).

² <https://medvind-oesterbyen.dk/om-medvind/baggrund>



Figure 2 Inequality across the railroad in Esbjerg

These community challenges served as the primary mobilizing factors with regard to the Collective Impact initiative. For the younger portion of the target population, i.e., those who were still attending school, the issue was framed in terms of the consequences of poverty, thereby highlighting the effects of growing up in economically disadvantaged households. For individuals who had completed their K-12 education but were neither employed nor pursuing further education, the problem was articulated in terms of social and economic exclusion. Members of this group, who are often referred to as the "restgruppen" or "the remainders"³, represented individuals who were marginalized from the labour market and education systems. Thus, the target population was depicted as facing interrelated challenges pertaining to poverty, educational disengagement, and unemployment. Figure 2 illustrates the location and characteristics of the area investigated in this research.

In this chapter, we seek to obtain an understanding of the empirical setting of the MedVind i Østerbyen initiative by discussing the historical, organizational, and socioeconomic factors that frame this case. The importance of this setting extends to the preintervention context of Østerbyen, where high levels of poverty, educational disengagement, and social exclusion define the population targeted by the initiative. Understanding these socioeconomic conditions is crucial with regard to

³ Translated by the author from the Danish "restgruppen"; <https://www.ae.dk/analyse/2021-11-15-29-aarige-76600-er-uden-uddannelse-og-arbejde>.

further research on this topic, as it can contextualize the objectives of MedVind as well as the specific barriers faced by its target demographic. A brief introduction to the establishment of MedVind i Østerbyen as partnership, initiative and organization alongside an account of the target population have laid the foundation for the fieldwork that is to be described methodologically in chapter 04, but first follows a chapter on literature and theoretical background.

03 Literature and Theoretical Background

This chapter first reviews the literature on social innovation with the goal of positioning the dissertation within this stream of research. The chapter then reviews the growing body of academic literature on Collective Impact, which is presented as both a concept and the research that has been preoccupied with it. Subsequently, the chapter investigates the notion of systemic change and highlights its relevance as a key theoretical foundation of this thesis. Finally, the chapter synthesizes these concepts, thereby revealing that Collective Impact and systemic change are interconnected and mutually reinforcing frameworks that can promote long-term social transformation as part of social innovation.

03.01 Understanding and Unpacking Social Innovation: definitions, fields and spread

This section provides an overview over some of the existing strands of literature on social innovation, as well as highlights studies within the specific area of social innovation in public sector builds on and adds to. Thus, the aim is to show how this area of study is vibrant, growing, and that this dissertation adds to the field.

At core, the notion of social innovation refers to innovation that is social in terms of both its means and its ends (Gallouj et al., 2018; Moulaert, 2013; Nicholls et al., 2015); that is, social innovation focuses on both the process, i.e., how the innovation comes about, and the outcome, i.e., what impact the innovation has on society. On the basis of a number of state-of-the-art understandings of this concept, Voorberg et al. (2015) defined social innovation as “the creation of long-lasting outcomes that aim to address societal needs by fundamentally changing the relationships, positions and rules between the involved stakeholders, through an open process of participation, exchange and collaboration with relevant stakeholders, including end-users, thereby crossing organizational boundaries and jurisdictions” (p. 1334). In this context, these authors referred to the work of Hartley (2005), Bason

(2010), Osborne and Brown (2011), Sorensen and Torfing (2011), and Chesbrough (2003)

Social innovation can be distinguished from other types of innovation because it responds to societal challenges, such as social inequality, environmental degradation, and economic disparity, by proposing human-centred, collaborative approaches, as opposed to innovations that focus on technological or market advancements (Tracey & Stott, 2017). The evolution of social innovation reflects an increasingly widespread consensus among scholars, policymakers, and practitioners that technological innovations alone are insufficient to address the systemic social and economic challenges that modern societies face (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). In this context, social innovation extends beyond technological fixes by emphasizing collective action and societal transformation, although Abad and Ezponda (2022) highlighted the fact that the relationships among social, technological and business innovation remain underresearched. In addition to its reaction against innovation, which has characterized this notion as being primarily technological and focused on profit optimization, the social innovation literature is also widely concerned with issues of both justice and sustainability (Grimm et al., 2013; Ziegler, 2017).

Social innovation is a multidisciplinary concept that has found resonance across a wide array of academic fields, thus reflecting its broad applicability to societal challenges. The research on social innovation, which was initially rooted in the fields of sociology and political science, has expanded to encompass disciplines such as economics, management, urban studies, and public administration. This interdisciplinary engagement has produced a richer understanding of how social innovations emerge and are sustained. For example, scholars in the field of management and business research have contributed insights into the ability of networks and collaborative processes to foster innovation, while sociologists have focused on the social relations and power dynamics that underlie these innovations (Moulaert et al., 2014; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017). Additionally, urban studies and regional development research have emphasized the importance of place-based social innovation, especially in local and community-driven contexts (Brandsen et al., 2016; Domanski, 2020). The convergence of these academic perspectives has highlighted not only the complexity of social innovation but also the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address the multifaceted problems that this approach aims to solve.

In addition to the growing body of academic research on this topic, the grey literature on social innovation has increased, a phenomenon which was driven

particularly by organizations such as the OECD and the European Union (EU). The significance of social innovations for efforts to meet the social, economic, political and environmental challenges of the twenty-first century has been recognized not only by stakeholders at the local, regional and even national levels but also within the Europe 2020 strategy and at a global scale (Domanski et al., 2020)

These institutions have played a key role in the process of promoting social innovation as a critical tool for addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges. Through initiatives such as the Europe 2020 strategy, the EU has explicitly embraced social innovation as a means of fostering inclusive growth and sustainable development across member states. Another project that has been highlighted in this context is the European funded project TEPsIE (i.e., Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe), which was implemented from 2012 to 2014 with the goal of promoting an EU strategy for social innovation. The contributors to this project included the Danish Technologist Institute. As a result, numerous policy papers, reports, and frameworks have been produced with the goal of encouraging the adoption of social innovation at the local, regional, and national levels (Campomori & Casula, 2023)

Similarly, the OECD has highlighted the importance of social innovation as a driver of societal progress, especially in areas in which traditional market or state mechanisms have failed to meet human needs (OECD, 2021). This grey literature has significantly influenced policy development, thereby bridging the gap between academic theory and practical implementation in this context. However, as these reports have often relied on broad definitions of social innovation, concerns have been raised regarding potential for this context to become overextended, thus leading to ambiguity in terms of its practical application (Grimm et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the contributions of the OECD and the EU in this regard have been crucial with respect of the process of mainstreaming social innovation as a key component of public policy discussions and development agendas both in Europe and beyond.

The societal challenges that social innovation has been deemed an answer to, are those complex challenges described as so-called wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1974). In practice, social innovations can take the form of “ideas, actions, frames, models, systems, processes, services, rules and regulations as well as new organizational forms” (Nicholls et al., 2015, p. 2). This notion has been applied in a wide range of contexts, such as long-term unemployment, elderly individuals, loneliness, and refugees (Lasgaard et al., 2023; Scupola et al., 2021)

In addition to its focus on the development of products and services, social innovation also emphasizes an increasing transformation of society (Avelino et al., 2019; Galego et al., 2022), a change that has been identified as both systemic (Nicholls et al., 2015) and paradigmatic (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014) and that occurs when social innovation succeeds in altering existing ways of thinking and acting. This specific element of social innovation is what this study has been preoccupied with and will be further unpacked in section 03.03.

Despite its widespread popularity, social innovation has also been criticized as a vague and often overstretched concept. Scholars such as Grimm et al. (2013) have argued that this term has been taken in so many directions that it risks losing its coherence and practical value. Ziegler (2017) expressed concern that the broad use of social innovation may dilute its effectiveness as a concept that can be employed to promote real alternatives or improvements. Another critique has focused on the constructed nature of social problems, which give rise to questions such as how to determine which social problems are worthy of support; answers to these questions have often tended to reflect the values of those in power (Tracey & Stott, 2017), and thus, the “impacts of social innovation are never ‘ethically neutral’” (Lawrence et al., 2014, p. 325). Pel et al. (2023) referred to a ‘normative void’ as well as to the neoliberal and instrumentalist appropriation of this concept, which have resulted in a ‘managerial breed’ of social innovation that is used to support isolated projects while failing to make a commitment to radical societal transformation (Avelino et al., 2019; Jessop et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2017)

At the heart of these critiques lies the tension between a conception of social innovation as a fashionable catch-all term and a perspective that recognizes its potential for promoting *systemic change*. Despite these critiques, both scholars and practitioners continue to engage with the notion of social innovation, and it has also been embraced by the public sector.

03.01.01 Social Innovation in the Public Sector: appeal, possibilities and critique

Social innovation has been described as a fashionable, magic concept that is well received everywhere it lands and that includes both the public sector and philanthropic or nonprofit organizations (Abad & Ezponda, 2022; Bragaglia, 2021; Wittmayer, Julia M. et al., 2017). Social innovation occurs in all sectors, i.e., public, nonprofit and private, and as Murray et al. (2010) indicated, a great deal of this

innovation occurs between the fixed boundaries that characterize these sectors. As social innovation often emerges in response to wicked problems and grand societal challenges (Nicholls et al., 2015; Scupola et al., 2021), many of which are believed to be due to failure of the state (or at least its inability) to meet human, societal and environmental needs (Galego et al., 2022), the public sector has also embraced this concept, thus leading to the next section of this dissertation on the increasingly widespread interest in and application of the notion of social innovation within the public sector. While some scholars have argued that social innovation can be used to modernize the welfare state (Campomori & Casula, 2023, p. 173), others have viewed social innovation as an attempt to fill the void left by a retreating welfare state (Avelino et al., 2019). Although the nonprofit sector has primarily been associated most closely with social innovation (Desmarchelier et al., 2020), social innovation has also been embraced in the public sector, especially as a component of public sector innovation (Bekkers et al., 2014; Bekkers & Tummers, 2018; Scupola et al., 2021).

In the field of public administration, the shift from traditional public administration to NPM and subsequently to NPG fundamentally reshaped the public sector's approach to innovation, especially by emphasizing collaboration and social outcomes. Under NPM, innovation was understood primarily in terms of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and the public sector often drew on practices employed in the private sector to improve its ability to deliver public services (Torfing et al., 2020; Torfing & Triantafyllou, 2013). While innovation was central to NPM, its focus was largely on market-driven principles and managerial reforms aimed at optimizing performance rather than on the complex social dimensions of public challenges (Kattel et al., 2023). In contrast, NPG led to a renewed focus on social innovation, specifically by emphasizing co-production, participation, and cross-sector collaboration with the goal of generating public and social value (Ansell & Torfing, 2021)

Unlike the efficiency-oriented framework of NPM, NPG views innovation as inherently social, namely, as a process that involves partnerships among the government, civil society, and private sector with the goal of developing collaborative solutions to 'wicked problems' such as inequality, poverty, and climate change. NPG highlights the importance of relationships, networks, and trust, which are key elements involved in the co-creation of solutions that address both the social and the systemic roots of these challenges (Torfing & Triantafyllou, 2013). This shift has also given rise to what Rizzo et al. (2017) identified as "the emergence of the 'co' paradigm" (p. 128), which refers to the increasing interest in co-creation and co-production among both academics and practitioners (Aastvedt & Higdem, 2022; Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Sorrentino et al., 2018; Voorberg et al., 2015).

Social innovation in the public sector is closely linked to innovations pertaining to delivery of public services and service design. Scupola et al. (2021) reviewed the literature on social innovation in the Danish public sector on the basis of an exploration of public service innovation networks for social innovation (PSINSIs). These authors reported that the literature could be grouped into four themes: (1) co-creation, (2) collaboration with civil society, (3) social entrepreneurs and social innovation and (4) public-private innovation partnerships (ibid). They claimed that social innovation has long played both invisible and neglected roles in the process of completing public tasks and that the literature has rarely addressed the interrelations between these two concepts; they thus called for further research on ways of integrating these perspectives.

Similar to the broader critiques of social innovation that have been discussed, researchers focusing on social innovation in the public sector have specifically highlighted the dangers of social innovation, particularly with respect to its possibility of becoming a substitute for the state's responsibility to provide welfare services.

However, a critical reading of the discourse that has supported this agenda reveals its inherently neoliberal rhetoric, which presents social innovation as a substitute for the state's responsibility to provide welfare services (Jessop et al., 2013). Galego and Bragaglia (2021) warned that the 'magic' of social innovation discussed previously should not be transformed into a Trojan horse, in line with previous neoliberal appropriations of this concept that have identified it as a cost-efficient way of reducing public intervention and responsibility.

Although researchers have begun to highlight the role of social innovation in public tasks, the questions of how such innovation might address public needs and how it can be accepted within the public sector remain unanswered (Scupola et al., 2021). This issue guides us to the next section, in which the specific framework for social innovation known as Collective Impact is reviewed in light of its acceptance in the Danish public sector.

03.02 Collective Impact as Framework for Social Innovation: Meaning, origin and application

Collective Impact was first presented by John Kania and Mark Kramer in their 2011 article as a cross-sector, multistakeholder, collaborative approach to social issues

through changes in the system (Kania & Kramer, 2011). These authors published the seminal article in this field in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (SSIR), a magazine and website that is published by The Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society; in this context, these authors represented consultants for the Foundation Strategy Group (FSG), a USA-based, mission-driven consulting firm.

This framework originated in the field of education, particularly on the basis of a Cincinnati nonprofit known as Strive. Strive, which was involved in organizational collaborations, succeeded in improving education and addressing the student achievement crisis by unifying many community leaders throughout the educational chain to promote cradle-to-career engagements. Why was Strive able to make progress when so many other multiactor collaborations failed? On the basis of this parting question, Kania and Kramer highlighted the abandonment of individual agendas in favour of a collective approach, thereby emphasizing the fact that no single organization could accomplish this goal alone. They referred to this shift as a move from an isolated approach to an approach rooted in the notion of collective impact, which involves “a centralized 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 & Kramer, 2011, p. 38). These authors built on the experiences of Strive and other successful multistakeholder engagements by identifying five conditions that they claimed can lead to large-scale social change through collective (as opposed to isolated) impacts: a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations. This framework is illustrated in Figure 3.

From this point, the article spread rapidly among organizations that engage with the notion of social innovation, primarily including granters and grantees, funders, and nonprofits that work with various social and environmental issues, such as mental health and homelessness among veterans (Wagner et al., 2023), education (Zuckerman, 2022), community wellbeing (Riley et al., 2021) and marine conservation (Mendis & Decker, 2022).

The notion of collective impact in some context thus transitioned into Collective Impact, thereby taking on a formalized status, as indicated by the capitalization of the letters in its name. This shift represented a transformation from a mere aspiration or ambition—i.e., the notion of making a significant difference collectively rather than pursuing this goal solely on an individual/organizational basis—into the establishment of the five conditions as practical guidelines. The five elements that are required for such a collective impact thus became components of a structured

framework that was accessible as a method that could practically be implemented. In addition to these five conditions, Weaver (2016) suggested that three preconditions must be satisfied to maximize an initiative's effectiveness: influential leaders, a sense of urgency with regard to the issue at hand, and the availability of adequate resources (p. 12).



Figure 3 The Five Conditions of Collective Impact

Collective Impact primarily requires participants to have a **shared agenda**, on which basis they can align their efforts and mobilize. This requirements demands that participants have a 'common understanding of the problem' (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39). Such a shared agenda shares similarities with the notion of a 'mission' and thus with mission-oriented innovation (Boorman et al., 2023; Mazzucato, 2017).

Second, a **shared measurement system** is highly focused on the continuous measurement of impact and progress in a way that is agreed upon and shared among participating parties. Collecting data and measuring results consistently both with regard to a short list of indicators at the community level and across all participating organizations not only ensures that all efforts remain aligned but also enables the participants to hold each other accountable and to learn from each other's successes and failures. This process also includes focusing on evidence and creating infrastructure to facilitate data sharing. Collective Impact has been viewed by many as a data-driven approach (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022; Tilhou et al., 2021).

Mutually reinforcing activities encourage each participant to perform the specific set of activities at which he or she excels in a way that supports and is coordinated with the actions of others. This condition ultimately focuses on coordination and the importance of progressing in the same direction.

Continuous communication pertains to both external and internal communication. Participants need several years of regular meetings to acquire sufficient experience with each other to recognize and appreciate the common motivation underlying their divergent efforts. They need time to begin to believe that their own interests will be treated fairly and that decisions will be made on the basis of objective evidence and in pursuit of the best possible solution to the problem rather than favouring the priorities of one organization over another.

The backbone support organization serves as a supra-organization that is “[...] separate from the participating organization [...]”, particularly since “coordination takes time, and none of the participating organizations has any to spare”. Backbone staff members play the roles of planners, managers, data collectors, facilitators, administrators, mediators, and technology supporters (Boorman et al., 2023; DuBow et al., 2018; Kania & Kramer, 2011). The backbone organization has received more attention from researchers than have the other conditions, as this organization adds a governance element that can be investigated as well as because this condition is the factor that primarily differentiates Collective Impact from other cross-sector collaborations (ref).

Strive, as the forerunner of Collective Impact, divides this approach concisely into three roles: project manager, data manager, and facilitator. In their 2018 qualitative study of the Collective Impact initiative known as the Pacesetters programme, which consisted of 39 organizations across the US, DuBow et al. (2018) added five key mechanisms to the backbone facilitator role: regular meetings, accountability, national visibility, top-level leader involvement, and coaching (DuBow et al., 2018). According to Kania and Kramer (2011), “In the best of circumstances, these backbone organizations embody the principles of adaptive leadership: the ability to focus people’s attention and create a sense of urgency, the skill to apply pressure to stakeholders without overwhelming them, the competence to frame issues in a way that presents opportunities as well as difficulties, and the strength to mediate conflict among stakeholders” (p. 40). This leadership perspective is thus in line with the theory of adaptive systems and a systemic perspective of change (Heifetz et al., 2009). With regard to many initiatives associated with Collective Impact, which are typically initiated by nonprofits and therefore rely on philanthropic funds, funding is

a continuous task that is also the responsibility of the backbone organization. The platform concept can also be related to ideas that have been developed in the literature on network governance. Ansell and Gash identified the backbone element as part of the literature on network governance (2018), particularly defining it as the network governance equivalent of a collaborative platform.

In the grey literature, work associated with Collective Impact has been abundant. Collective Impact has generated an overwhelming amount of content, thus highlighting the widespread popularity and adoption of the framework among practitioners, consultants, and organizations. This body of work includes reports, case studies, toolkits, and other resources produced by think tanks, consultancies, and non-profit organizations, which have offered practical insights into the application of Collective Impact. Notably, the Foundation Strategy Group (FSG), the consultancy firm cofounded by John Kania and Mark Kramer, has published numerous guides and follow-up reports that have expanded on the practical implementation of the Collective Impact framework. The resources provided by this group offer step-by-step guidance for efforts to structure initiatives around the five key conditions as well as case studies highlighting the framework's effectiveness across various social issues.

Other prominent contributors to the grey literature on Collective Impact have included the Tamarack Institute, which offers various resources such as toolkits, webinars, and reports with the goal of supporting community leaders' efforts to implement this framework. The Collective Impact Forum, which is cohosted by FSG and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, has also played a crucial role in the dissemination of relevant grey literature by offering an online platform where practitioners can access resources, share experiences, and engage with webinars, blogs, and discussion forums.

In addition, Kania and Kramer themselves continue to contribute to this increasingly widespread body of grey literature. For example, their 2013 article "Embracing Emergence: How Collective Impact Addresses Complexity"⁴ expanded on their original framework by emphasizing the ability of emergent learning to drive progress in the context of Collective Impact initiatives. Similarly, the publication "Collective

⁴ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/social_progress_through_collective_impact

Insights into Collective Impact”,⁵ which appeared in 2014, provided updated insights into this framework, including in terms of reflections on the lessons learned from several years of practical application.

Academic peer-reviewed literature and research on Collective Impact have been published primarily in the journal *Community Development*, which was kickstarted in 2016 through the appearance of a special issue by guest editors Norman Walzer, Liz Weaver, and Catherine McGuire; this issue attempted to advance this field of research by contributing critical and practical perspectives. Special issues of this journal have included articles concerning why and how to work with Collective Impact (Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016), procedural factors that can indicate or influence collaboration (Gillam et al., 2016), and the roles played by power and privilege in the context of Collective Impact (LeChasseur, 2016), among other issues; these investigations have generally included American cases of the use of the Collective Impact framework for social change. Scholars who are engaged in Collective Impact, are closely collaborating with practitioners of Collective Impact, those addressing themselves as social innovators, community developers, change agents, etc. I believe this engagement with researchers to be a following of the cross-sectoral orientation and the inclusions of universities as knowledge-extensive organizations in collaborations.

Mayan et al. (2020) studied the appeal of the Collective Impact framework among Collective Impact practitioners, particularly by asking whether Collective Impact is a promising approach to the task of promoting systemic social change (p. 6); this author ultimately reported that the objective of systemic change, the inclusion of unlikely partners and relationship building were promising elements in this regard. With respect to relevant barriers, these authors identified time as a crucial element pertaining to donors’ expectations. Throughout the research on this topic, the relationships among participants have been identified as a crucial factor with respect to the outcomes of relevant initiatives (Gillam et al., 2016; Mayan et al., 2020; Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016)

Philanthropic foundations have been crucial to efforts to spread Collective Impact as a method, especially among nonprofits and grassroots organizations. Many Collective Impact initiatives rely on philanthropic funding, and in some cases, the addition of the Collective Impact approach has become an expected requirement for

⁵ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/defining_quality_collective_impact

receiving support (Gillam et al., 2016). By endorsing the collaborative framework of Collective Impact and providing financial support, foundations have helped popularize this method and identified it as a key framework in this context.

Beyond the USA, Collective Impact has been researched in Australia, as it has received attention in the field of social work. In 2019, Ennis and Tofa (2020) published a review of seven years of experiences with this framework, noting that by 2016, more than 80 “Collective Impact-style” projects were estimated to have been implemented in Australia alone (Ennis & Tofa, 2020). In their review of 19 research articles on Collective Impact, these authors concluded that the majority of research on this topic has been conducted in the USA, with only a few such studies appearing in Australia and Canada. Furthermore, the populations on which such research focused most frequently were the youth and families. Finally, half of the articles in question used Collective Impact as an analytical tool for collaborative projects, whereas the other half focused on projects that involved Collective Impact as a framework (Ennis & Tofa, 2020). In the broader Australian management literature, Salignac et al. (2018) situates Collective Impact among its “theoretical roots of network-based interorganizational collaboration” (p. 107), thereby claiming that Collective Impact is best understood as a method and highlighting the relational aspect of that method. While Salignac et al. (2018) identified Collective Impact as a form of network-based interorganizational collaboration, Christens and Inzeo (2015) argued that it should instead be identified as a theory of grassroots community organizing and coalitions, and Zuckermann (2022) claimed that it should be viewed as a model of partnerships.

The task of evaluating initiatives rooted in Collective Impact has proven to be difficult (Hommel et al., 2021; Panjwani et al., 2023; Stachowiak et al., 2020). In a 2023 review of studies that have sought to evaluate such initiatives, Panjwani et al. reported that evaluative measures are often influenced by grant requirements rather than the collaborative’s activities and that reliance on external funding leads to resistance to the notion of sharing negative feedback, as it is preferable to demonstrate effectiveness within a limited timeframe, thus making it difficult to measure the genuine impact of this approach in the long term.

Despite its widespread popularity, this framework has also been the target of academic criticism. A central and continuous point of critique in this context pertains to the absence of community in this framework: “...community voices are largely absent in the research presented here. There is almost no evidence of nonprofessional, community-member involvement in the selection of the social issues being addressed by CI [Collective Impact] projects and little evidence of inclusion in the

research either as participants or co-researchers” (Ennis & Tofa, 2020, p. 13). Similar to the concern for Trojan horses that has previously been mentioned in the social innovation literature, scholars who have explored Collective Impact have shared concerns with the neoliberal possibility that Collective Impact may be implemented as a business model or a method for justifying further cuts to government services (Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Ennis & Tofa, 2020). Another concern in this context pertains to the elitist view concerning who is able to decide which issues are pursued and which are not. Collective Impact has been criticized for its focus on mobilizing white, middle-class professionals (LeChasseur, 2016), thus highlighting the danger of social innovation practices in general and the issue of socially constructed societal problems in particular.

Despite these critiques of Collective Impact, the framework has also been implemented beyond the USA and Australia, where its implementation has primarily been driven by commercial foundations and philanthropic interests. As the grey literature has indicated, some large Danish foundations have exhibited concerns with social challenges, and Realdania and Bikubenfonden have adopted this framework. In 2022, Realdania published an ‘eksempelsamling’ of seven Danish initiatives inspired by Collective Impact. Two of these initiatives have also been used as points of departure for academic research and publications: “Reducing loneliness in the community. More Together (‘Flere i Fællesskaber’) - a complex intervention in Denmark” (Lasgaard et al., 2023) and “Pursuing collective impact: A novel indicator-based approach to assessment of shared measurements when planning for multi-functional land consolidation” (Johansen et al., 2018).

Collective Impact should be employed in efforts to target the issues to which Kania and Kramer referred in their earlier work as adaptive problems (Heifetz et al., 2004; Kania & Kramer, 2011), namely, problems that are “not so well defined, where the answers are not known in advance, and many different stakeholders are involved, each with their own perspectives” (p. 25). The complexity and interconnected nature of this approach indicated that it is also closely related to the concept of ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1974), which has been widely used in the management literature.

As Collective Impact continues to gain traction in Denmark, driven by the aforementioned philanthropic foundations Realdania and Bikubenfonden, its adoption highlights an increasingly widespread recognition of the need for coordinated, cross-sector efforts to address complex social challenges. However, the ultimate goal of such initiatives extends beyond collaboration - rather, they aim to facilitate

systemic change, a concept that lies at the heart of both Collective Impact and social innovation. In the following section, I explore the concept of systemic change alongside its theoretical foundations and examine how it serves as a critical framework for efforts to promote long-term, sustainable solutions across multiple sectors.

03.03 Systemic Change in Social Innovation and Collective Impact

Systemic change refers to the transformation of the underlying structures, processes, and power dynamics that perpetuate societal issues. This concept is central to both the social innovation literature and the Collective Impact framework, which share an understanding of the importance of a holistic worldview, interconnectedness and sustainable ambition with respect to the planet and its people.

The EU-funded project “Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change (SI-DRIVE)” mapped more than 1000 social innovation projects across Europe, revealing that 32% of these innovation projects aimed at promoting systemic change (Howaldt, Kaletka, Schröder, et al., 2016), which was referred to as “going for the max” (p. 9). This claim was echoed by Grant (2023), who reported that success in social innovation can range from achieving immediate targets to generating systemic change as an ultimate goal.

The aim of this section of the dissertation is to integrate the two streams of research concerning ‘systemic change’ presented above with one another. The first such stream is the social innovation literature; although this research scattered across many fields, it features a shared understanding that the ultimate goal of social innovation is systemic change (Domanski et al., 2020; Howaldt, Kaletka, & Schröder, 2016; Nicholls et al., 2015). Moreover, the social innovation framework of Collective Impact is based on a similar concept of systemic change; however, this framework is rooted in an understanding of systemic change and a tradition that is drawn from the notion of systemic thinking. In a simplified formulation, the social innovation literature has discussed the concept of systemic change in relation to scale. A systemic social innovation might lead to a broader transformation, while Collective Impact, which is rooted in the theory of systems thinking, treats this notion in a manner similar to the concept of depth prior to focusing on population-level outcomes.

In the context of social innovation, systemic change has often been viewed as the ultimate goal, which aims not only to address localized or immediate problems but also to rectify the structural issues that give rise to these challenges (Nicholls et al., 2015). Scholars such as Avelino, Domanski, and Moulaert have argued that social innovation should aim to produce changes in social systems through the use of collective action to meet neglected human needs, thereby transforming social relations and working towards sociopolitical transformation (Avelino et al., 2019; Domanski et al., 2020; Moulaert et al., 2017). The 'systemic' addressing of issues have also been merged with social innovation theory, Fisk et al. (2019) introduced the notion of 'systemic social innovation', whereas Zivkovic introduced the notion of 'systemic innovation labs' (2018) in a combination with the literature on innovation labs and Windrum et al. referred to radical innovation as 'systemic innovation' (2016).

The concept of systemic change in Collective Impact is based on the body of work by primarily Donella Meadows and Peter Senge. In the Collective Impact literature, the concept of systemic change is used as a way of understanding change that relies on systemic thinking. The publication 'Limits to Growth' has played a central role in the understanding of the concept of systemic change on which Collective Impact relies, as one of the authors of the Collective Impact publication known as "The Water of Systems Change", i.e., Peter Senge, was a student of Donella Meadows, who has been viewed as the primary researcher in the MIT group that was commissioned by the Club of Rome, an international think tank.

In 1972, these authors released the publication "The Limits to Growth" (D. Meadows et al., 1972), in which a computer model was used to produce a report that simulated future interactions among population growth, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion on a planet featuring finite resources. The primary argument of "The Limits to Growth" was that if humanity continues to pursue unchecked economic and population growth without considering ecological limits, the planet will face significant environmental and economic collapse within the 21st century. The authors presented several scenarios, in which context the "business as usual" scenario predicted overshoot and collapse due to resource exhaustion and environmental degradation. However, this report also proposed that with immediate action, such as limiting population growth, reducing consumption, and implementing sustainable practices, global society could establish a balance that could ensure long-term stability and wellbeing. They also addressed the issue of technological vs. social innovation: 'We believe in fact that the need will quickly become evident for social innovation to match technical change' (D. Meadows et al., 1972, p. 193). This report was controversial but highly influential, and it laid the

groundwork for modern discussions of sustainability, ecological limits, and the need for systemic change to avoid global collapse

Following, Meadows (2008) published the book 'Thinking in systems' with the goal of building on systemic thinking. In this book, she argues that thinking in the world should be viewed as a set of interrelated systems that consist of different elements, interconnections, and a function or purpose, sticking to an example familiar to the academic audience: the university (D. H. Meadows, 2008, pp. 13–17). Elements of the university setting include students, professors, buildings, lecturers, and administrative staff. Interconnectedness refers to the relationship among these elements. What it takes to get a grade, become a professor, budgets for the institutes, and the more invisible factors, such as gossip, informal knowledge regarding how to receive good grades or who it would be helpful to be on good terms with are also relevant in this context. Within the university setting, the purposes of different elements, such as obtaining a degree, being published, and balancing the budget, differ. Any of these factors could lead to conflict with the overall purpose of the system; for example, students could cheat, and lecturers could ignore their responsibility to teach. "Keeping sub-purposes and overall system purposes in harmony is an essential function of successful systems" (p. 16). Even if the elements of the university are changed, such as through the introduction of new students, new books, and new buildings, the university and the system remain the same. If the level of interconnectedness is changed, however, the system might change dramatically. If students were graded on the basis of their beer consumption or sword fights were used to settle academic arguments, these alterations would change the system. This account is the basis of systemic thinking, in which context the basis for systemic change is the idea that for change to happen, leverage points in the system must be identified. The elements can be changed, but the overall purpose of the system would still be the same. The notion of addressing the root causes of problems instead of their symptoms refers to this account.

Meadows' notion of systems thinking both pushes against reductionist approaches and calls for more holistic, interdisciplinary ways of addressing the challenges facing the world. The challenge of "pervasive reductionist understandings of social change" was also identified by Wittmayer et al. in their 2019 research on narratives of change and their role in the processes of social change associated with social transformation (Wittmayer et al., 2019). The concept of systems thinking is connected to changes aimed at securing a sustainable future (Hofman-Bergholm, 2018, p. 1) and a form of thinking that Flood (2010) claimed can help ensure that people remain "in touch with the wholeness of our existence" (p. 282). This situation has led to the emergence of a stream of research on systemic change that is closely

related to issues pertaining to environmental sustainability (see, e.g., Davelaar, 2021; König, 2015; Wolfram & Frantzeskaki, 2016).

Peter Senge was among the most relevant theorists associated with the systems dynamic community at MIT (Zhang & Ahmed, 2020). Whereas Meadows focused more closely on environmental and global sustainability, Senge incorporated these ideas into organizational change and leadership research; however, these authors shared core ideas pertaining to the need for holistic thinking and understanding feedback loops within systems with the aim of promoting meaningful, sustainable change. Senge's book known as "The Fifth Discipline" (Senge, 1990) is a well-renowned and frequently cited text in the field of organizational learning. Senge's subsequent work, such as *The Necessary Revolution* (2008), focused more explicitly on sustainability, including by calling for businesses to use systems thinking to address environmental and social issues.

In 2018, Senge teamed with the founders of Collective Impact and FSG to publish the report "The Water of System Change" (Kania et al., 2018). This report has since served as a foundation for many Collective Impact initiatives, as it offers a 'framework as an actionable model' that these authors termed 'the inverted iceberg'; this model was heavily influenced by Senge's previous work on systemic change, and inspired by Meadow's notion of leverage points for systemic change (D. Meadows, 1997). The inverted iceberg has made several appearances in the academic literature, most recently in the *Public Management Review* in Cole and Hagen's (2022) article on transformative learning in public sector innovation labs, which focused on case studies in Vancouver and Auckland.

The systemic approach has (re)gained attention in recent years, especially within the fields of public health and healthcare (Khayal, 2019; Nobles et al., 2022). The reasons for this resurgence might lie in the fact that this field already contains an understanding of itself as a system, i.e., the health system, including relevant terminology. This situation offers the opportunity to use the concept of systemic change alongside an image and understanding of what that system is that is intelligible to most people. We understand what it means to want to change the health system. Similarly, the educational system 'enjoys' the same advantage. I am not proposing that these systems are less complex or that they lack clear-cut boundaries or defining issues; rather, I claim only that we already perceive and speak of these targets for change as systems. With respect to social innovations, especially those that are local and community oriented, it is more difficult to see the system that they are attempting to change. In this context, the use of the term 'ecosystem' has proven to be useful, as it can evoke an image of interconnectedness.

In 2015, Nicholls et al. called attention to the fact that social innovation already seemed to be entering a new phase, which featured an increasing focus on not only local issues but also systemic issues. Since that time, especially since the beginning of the research reported in this dissertation in 2020, interest in systemic change on the part of both the grey literature and the public has increased; this change has primarily been due to the emergence of a discourse concerning ‘failed systems’, which often refer to various components of the public sector, such as the education system or health system, or the dagpenge (unemployment allowance) system. In 2024, BCG published a whitepaper that was commissioned by a group of prominent foundations; this paper was titled “Fonde og systemforandring Fonde forudsætninger for at adressere komplekse samfundsproblemer i Danmark” [Foundations and systemic change: Foundations prerequisites for addressing complex societal problems in Denmark]⁶⁷. This whitepaper was intended to ‘map and accelerate philanthropic work through systemic change’; it mapped the existing philanthropic landscape and concluded that 93% of the 41 questioned foundations included in the paper reported that they worked with systemic change. When these foundations were asked who the most important actors in systemic change were, their top three answers were government authorities, politicians and political organizations, and municipalities. They ranked themselves (i.e., the foundations) as number five on the list, and they ranked citizens as number nine. The publication of this whitepaper highlights the increasingly widespread attention to and interest in the systemic approach among philanthropic organizations as well as the belief that the public sector must play a central role in this approach to the task of addressing complex societal challenges.

03.04 Towards a Research Question

Social innovation, Collective Impact, and systemic change are interconnected concepts that, when combined, create a powerful framework that can be used to address complex societal challenges. Social innovation serves as the broad umbrella under which new ideas and approaches emerge with the goal of meeting social

⁶ Translated by the author

⁷ file:///C:/Users/kadj/Downloads/BCG-Transision_Fonde-og-systemforandring_White-paper_260824.pdf

needs in more effective, sustainable, and inclusive ways. Such innovation thus represents the driving force that underlies efforts to find solutions that traditional methods fail to provide, thereby engaging diverse actors across sectors with the aim of generating meaningful change. Collective Impact builds on the principles of social innovation by offering a structured framework for efforts to promote cross-sector collaboration, a framework that has become increasingly popular within both municipalities and philanthropic foundations. Each such principle influences or is guided by more relationally oriented and cross-sectoral forms of collaboration.

Systemic change, which is the ultimate goal of both social innovation and Collective Impact, refers to the transformation of underlying structures, institutions, and norms that perpetuate social problems. While social innovation inspires the development of new solutions and Collective Impact provides a collaborative framework for scaling those solutions, systemic change ensures that these efforts lead to long-term, sustainable shifts in societal systems. Accordingly, systemic change does not focus solely on addressing individual issues but rather on reshaping the very systems that produce and maintain those issues, thereby ensuring that the resulting solutions are embedded within society's institutions, policies, and behaviours. By integrating these three concepts, a holistic approach to societal transformation emerges, thus forming a cohesive strategy that can be used to address the multi-layered and interdependent challenges that are encountered in contemporary societies.

With respect to the literature discussed above, I have presented the interest of the public sector in engaging in social innovation and enhanced collaboration across sectors as part of a shift away from the NPM paradigm towards a more collaborative and cross-sector-oriented approach to NPG. Similarly, I have presented the state-of-the-art literature on the ways in which Collective Impact has established itself as a widely used and burgeoning framework for social innovation with the specific goal of promoting systemic change. These streams of research jointly serve as the backdrop of this dissertation, which focuses on the transformative potential of social innovation from the perspective of 'systemic change', which is explored by reference to the framework of Collective Impact.

If the question is 'what is social innovation really about - solving problems or transforming systems?' the literature tells us that it is about both, and that social innovation entails both the practices, projects and outcomes, while also altering existing ways of knowing, organizing and thinking. Seeing Collective Impact as a specific framework for engaging in social innovation, the literature speaks of system-level outcome and population level outcomes, but with a rooting in the belief that in

order for population-level outcomes to be long-standing and sustainable, problems should be addressed through systemic change. In this study, the population on which change is worked for, is the children and youth aged 0 – 25 in the Eastern City. The outcomes for these children are beyond the scope of this study, that instead focusses on the other outcome, systems-level outcomes. A research focus that is widely addressed theoretically within specific fields such as health and education but have received very little empirical attention.

The initial aim of this project was to explore the potential of the Collective Impact framework and to identify barriers to systemic change; this approach has been identified as a key element that can be used to distinguish Collective Impact from other collaborative approaches. As the research progressed, a notable increase in public discourse concerning systemic change was observed, thus reflecting the increasing importance of this topic in both academic and practical contexts. This shift naturally influenced the direction of this research, particularly by expanding its scope to include a deeper focus on systemic change as a critical component of social innovation efforts.

This dissertation is motivated by real-world concerns, particularly those pertaining to the needs of Esbjerg Municipality, which sought to collaborate with a researcher to “gain knowledge and build their organization”. This research thus serves a dual purpose: first, it aims to explore how the Collective Impact framework has been adapted to suit the Danish context, and second, it aims to contribute to the broader literature on social innovation and systemic change, particularly in the public sector.

In line with the calls of previous studies, including by Cajaiba-Santana (2014), who highlighted the need for shifts in mindsets and new ways of thinking with respect to social innovation, this dissertation seeks to promote the integration of systemic thinking into social innovation practices. By examining how systemic change is currently conceptualized and implemented, this research aims to deepen our understanding of how cross-sectoral collaborations can lead to transformative change.

While this study responds to the knowledge needs of a project partner, it also addresses various gaps in the literature. For instance, Domanski et al. (2017) highlighted the growing role played by intermediary infrastructures, such as social innovation labs and centres, in the process of facilitating local innovation initiatives. These intermediaries have increasingly been viewed as pivotal to efforts to promote social innovation; however, many questions remain unanswered in this context—particularly regarding their typologies and roles as well as the specific

competencies that are required for their effective operation. This research contributes to these ongoing discussions by offering insights into how social innovation can be further conceptualized, particularly in the context of public sector innovation.

Social innovation requires process-oriented, reflexive and explorative research (Wittmayer et al., 2017). Researchers working in this field have reached a broad consensus that social innovation research cannot, as noted by Nicholls et al. (2015) in reference to the forward by Geoff Mulgan, be “detached, empirical social science; it is inevitable - and healthy - that research is coupled with practice” (p. 15). Furthermore, the fact that the researcher often shares “the transformative ambitions of social innovation protagonists, and then participate in the creation and diffusion of innovations” (Aiken, 2017) has been emphasized, and as social innovation is a dynamic journey in its own right, it also requires time-sensitive methodologies (Wittmayer, et al., 2017). In this study, the methodological journey pertaining to the social innovative Collective Impact initiative involved ethnographic fieldwork. I employed ethnography as a co-research methodology and engaged with practice, which was facilitated by the fact that I was an industrial PhD and thus shared the transformative ambition of the host organization. In the following chapter (i.e., Chapter 4), this methodological journey is explicated.

04 A Fieldwork Journey: Methodological Considerations

The aim of this chapter is to describe the research methodology employed in this dissertation, which is rooted in organizational ethnography. As each article contains its own methods section, this chapter aims to elaborate on these discussions as well as make room for more overall methodological considerations. A linear route through ethnographic fieldwork is impossible, and the processes of entering the field, taking observations, and conducting interviews and analysis have been described as inherently ‘messy’ (Balletero & Winthereik, 2021; Lambotte & Meunier, 2013) or even chaotic (Donnelly et al., 2013). The ‘industrial’ component of this process increased the complexity of ethics and reflexivity, and a constant pendular iteration between ‘academia’ and ‘industry’ characterized the production of this study.

In the following chapter, I have allowed space for these methodological considerations in an attempt to make sense of the messy ethnographic process, which has been part of my journey through the field but has not been discussed in scientific articles (or even viewed as taboo) due to both spatial limitations and academic tradition (Anteby, 2013). This chapter thus addresses the ‘industrial’ nature of this dissertation by presenting my considerations of the ‘ethnographic gaze’ as well as detailed accounts of how the empirical material used in this research was collected and how the corresponding data were generated.

04.01 An Ethnographic Approach

This research took the form of an organizational ethnography. Ethnography is both something that can be known and a way of knowing (McGranahan, 2018); thus, it represents both a methodological approach to and an analytic perspective on social research, which includes and weaves together various methods, theories and

styles of writing. A broad definition of ethnography identifies it as a study of explorative nature that involves working with unstructured data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) and as the practice of immersing oneself into a community for an extended period (Alvesson, 2003; Atkinson, 2014; McGranahan, 2018), thereby becoming a natural component of the setting in which fieldwork is conducted (Brinkmann & Tanggaard, 2010). Ethnography is thus both an epistemology and an ontology (Agar, 2010; McGranahan, 2018) that rests on abduction and iteration. At core, ethnography focuses on *being there* (McGranahan, 2018) and engaging in the complexities of everyday life through the use of relations to study relations (Strathern, 2020).

In the tradition of organizational ethnography, the entity of interest is constituted by the social patterns that we call organizations (Jørgensen et al., 2015) and organizational settings (Yanow, 2012; Ybema et al., 2009). Organizational ethnography is a marked form of ethnography that extends the ethnographic methodology beyond its 'home' in anthropology and engages with the fields of organizational, management and administrative studies (Ybema et al., 2009), thereby revealing how people in particular work settings come to understand, take action and manage everyday situations. This approach is sensitive to the practical complexity and surprises that can emerge with regard to the relationship between theoretical expectations and empirical observations (Yanow, 2000).

According to Gherardi (2019), ethnography seems to be 'in fashion' in organizational studies (p. 741), including, according to Czarniawskas, as a way of explaining the general enthusiasm for opening black boxes (Czarniawska, 2012, Gherardi 2019). With respect to the novel organizational framework represented by a Collective Impact initiative, ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to observe exactly what people do and discuss in a natural setting rather than relying solely on retrospective explanations obtained through interviews. It was thus possible to observe the in situ development of a new organizational form.

An essential component of ethnography is time. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork is time-consuming, and Van Maanen even referred to ethnography as 'unbearably slow' (2011a, p. 220). In the context of studying social innovation within an organization, this ethnographic slowness provides an opportunity to "stay long enough to see change occurring" (van Hulst et al., n.d., p. 223). The unbearable slowness of ethnography allowed me to explore systemic change, a change that, as I subsequently argue (Article C), is equally slow.

04.01.01 Conducting Ethnographic Field-work: Data-Generating Opportunities and Immersive Participant Observation

I entered the field on February 1st, 2020, i.e., the same day on which I began work on this dissertation. I considered my field to be ‘MedVind i Østerbyen’, understood as an organization, although I acknowledged that it was also considered an ‘initiative’ at that point in time and resembled a network-like structure. Accordingly, the boundaries of my field were somewhat clear but also not at all, as many actors flowed in and out of the collaborative ecosystem.

A ‘new-in-job’ sticker was placed on my chest, thus leading to a period during which it was necessary for me to familiarize myself with the organization, both as a unit in its own right and, in part, as a public organization associated with the municipality. The emotional labour involved in the task of establishing trust between researcher and informants (Fine & Shulman, 2009) was performed in light of the belief that these relationships affect and shape the data that can be generated in this context (Gosovic, 2018), accordingly, the process of establishing trust between the researcher and the informants was a primary focus at the beginning of the fieldwork.

I entered the field by asking the following question: “What are we doing here?”. This question is a subtle alteration of the following classical ethnographic question: “What’s going on here?” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This adaptation was in line with my natural access to and active participation in the context under investigation (Alvesson, 2003), and it allowed me to explore the research question: “What is the potential of Collective Impact in a Danish context?”. Entering the field often represents a process of gaining access; however, as industrial PhD projects involve collaboration between industry and universities, access was already granted in this context due to the organization’s desire to have a ‘critical friend’ who would be able to provide an outsider perspective on their blind spots (Johnson et al., 2006; Ybema et al., 2009) concerning systemic change and social innovation.

The ethnographic material, i.e., the data consulted in this research, was collected on the basis of what I perceived as a list of five ‘data-generating opportunities’, with inspiration from Kueckers’ (2023) emphasis on lists in qualitative research and Christiansen’s (2024) notion of ‘entry points’ in his fieldwork on public irrationalities.

Although ‘ethnographic material’ is a preferred term in interpretivist and reflexive research, such as organizational ethnography (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), I have

continued to employ the term 'data', mainly because the findings presented in Article C, in which context a narrow understanding of data as exclusively quantitative represents a barrier to the desired change. By committing to an approach that involved referring to my own ethnographic material as 'data', I wanted to challenge that notion within the organization. I did, however, distance myself from the claim that data can be collected. Data are generated by the ethnographer, who serves as a tool in the process of co-laboring with informants. The list consists of five such opportunities for data generation, including people, places, paper, performance, and participation, as presented in Table 1. Jointly, these five opportunities for data generation constituted my fieldwork.

Participant observation has been identified as the core of ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson et al., 2001; Mason, 2017); however, my role as an industrial PhD (as discussed in section 04.02) rendered me more of a participant than an observer, in line with the term 'participating observer' used by Alvesson (2003) rather than that of participant observations. Participation was primary in this context (Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2016). My observations focused on the kind of tasks in which the informants engaged, how decisions were made, who referred to who, who participated, who decided who participated, what was heard, who was silenced, what was easy, what subjects of conversations were recurrent, and what issues were never discussed. I sought to understand how relevant actors understood the initiative and to identify the narratives and experiences that were predominant among these actors and in the organization as a whole. The place in which I spent most of my time was the backbone office, which was a primary site for participation, observations and conversations. I spent a great deal of time at my desk in the backbone organization and was present when relevant actors visited; I thus became a familiar face for various actors, even beyond the backbone employees. The fact that I performed other tasks related to the PhD programme, such as preparing teaching materials and reading literature, in this location, allowed me to familiarize myself with everyday life of the organization, on which basis I attempted to map out and make sense of not only MedVind but also the municipality, the history of the community, and the relationships among various departments and institutions. I have relied on Alma Gottlieb's definition of fieldwork as "gossiping with footnotes" since I heard it in a podcast on anthropological methodology, although she has not written about this definition directly. Atkinson (2017), however, referred to gossip as an essential component of fieldwork. Despite the poor reputation of gossip, it is an essential way of understanding organizations and the relationships that are embedded within them. In everyday life, gossip is distributed in organizations at coffee machines, near water coolers and over lunch. Accordingly, the act of 'hanging out' at these places offered me the opportunity to generate data.

Table 1 Data-Generating Opportunities

PLACES	Ethnographic observations	- Backbone everyday life - coffee meetings with actors
PEOPLE	Conversations, informal interviews, and interviews.	- 16 formalized, semistructured interviews with steering committee members, partner group members and backbone staff - Conversations and informal interviews conducted as part of the participant observations in the backbone office.
PERFORMANCE	Key situations and events in which an external presentation of the organization was held	- Backbone and chairmanship study trip to Nesta + thrive @ five - Visits from three Danish municipalities - Exhibition 'Youth Voices'
PARTICIPATION	Projects, steering committee, evaluation meetings, workshops, and informal meetings	Steering committee meetings: 09.06.20, 09.12.20, 25.02.21, 11.10.22, 15.12.2022, 01.03.2023
PAPER	Documents	- Partnership agreement - 'Theory of change' - Job postings for a backbone consultant, communication consultant, and backbone data-analyst. - External evaluation - Funding application by Lauritzen Fonden - 'The road forward' publication by MedVind - Reports from the backbone office to the chairmanship

I conducted formalized interviews with all the members of the steering committee and partner group. These interviews focused on the value that participants experienced with regard to their association with the Collective Impact approach as well as their previous experience with other forms of collaboration, the roles that they played, and the roles that they perceived the municipality and the foundation as playing in this context. These interviews were conducted via Zoom since they took place during the 2020 coronavirus lockdown period. The interviews were recorded via the recording function of Zoom and subsequently transcribed. Informal interviews and everyday conversations were also considered to represent meaning-making processes of co-construction between the researcher and the individuals under investigation (Cassell & Symon, 2006).

Although the transcribed interviews served as data in their own right, the interviews also represented a point of departure for further conversations with the relevant actors and as a basis for observing their roles and participation in meetings. In particular, the steering group meetings continually served as a relevant location for generating data, as most actors were present together and engaged in conversation at these meetings. With respect to these meetings, my fieldwork notes consisted of notes regarding who was present and who was not and who spoke as well as participants' tones of voice and the tensions among them. I paid particular attention to themes pertaining to the backbone, systemic change and Collective Impact, understood as a method.

Performance refers to situations that are notable from the perspective of everyday life, such as special circumstances and events in which the Collective Impact alliance took part. In these instances, the alliance was an entity that presented itself as a united whole. In this context, I paid attention to the way in which this organization framed itself with the goal of obtaining insights into relevant actors' self-perceptions.

Paper refers not only to various types of documents but also to presentations of these documents as ethnographic artefacts (Atkinson, 2014; Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021). A piece of paper that contains a theory of change is interesting to analyse in terms of its content, but it is also valuable as an organizational artefact; namely, the decision to create this artifact, drawn arrows, the choice of layout, and the ways in which it was printed, filed, and distributed can all generate data. This insight also applies to other pieces of paper, such as evaluations, which not only provide data concerning the progress being made towards the predetermined goals of the alliance but also serve as a communicative tool to the external world

regarding such progress; the legitimizing value that these pieces of paper can exhibit is also relevant in this context.

I journalled my observations. Taking fieldnotes, which were intertwined with reflective notes, methodological notes, personal emotional notes, and theoretical and analytical considerations (Emerson et al., 2001; Van Maanen, 2011b; Walford, 2009). Further reflections on notetaking are addressed in section 04.02.02.

04.02 Putting the Industrial in PhD

In addition to its efforts to contribute to academia and research in an academic disciplinary field, this study, as part of a public sector industrial PhD associated with the Innovation Foundation programme, must contribute to the organization that hosts this PhD. The purpose of such an industrial PhD, which originated from the natural and medical sciences, was to contribute to a specific project, object or work on a specific hypothesis in the host organization. The programme has since been expanded to include the social sciences, in which context the notion of a 'contribution' can be more challenging to define, particularly when the relevant outcome is not a tangible, patentable product or discovery. Furthermore, this thesis is a public industrial PhD; that is, the host organization is public, in this case a municipality, and the project must thus be valuable to the public sector. Public value is a concept that does not lend itself to clear definitions (Bryson et al., 2017). What constitutes 'valuable' in this context is naturally subject to debate, but it is true that social science often generates new questions and insights that can be put to various uses rather than offering specific answers (Christiansen, 2013).

In this study, the host organization was also the subject of inquiry. Accordingly, not only did I study something *for* a public organization; I also studied the organization itself, thus increasing the complexity of the fieldwork and the web of relations that it contained. As this research was funded by the host organization, the purpose of the research itself was entangled with the organizational agenda, and my role as a researcher was entangled with my dual roles as employee and researcher, observer and participant, colleague and critic, and insider and outsider; accordingly, it is necessary to reflect critically on the consequences that this situation had on the empirical material generated for this research.

Studying social innovation on the basis of a framework such as Collective Impact, which exhibits a cross-sectoral and multiactor character, calls for a methodological

approach that can enable the researcher to become part of the collaborative process. In the field of ethnography, the dichotomies of closeness/distance, insider/outsider and at home/in the field have been the subject of vivid discussion (Bilgen & Fábos, 2023; Bruskin, 2018; Järventie-Thesleff et al., 2016; Labaree, 2002). I was not ‘at home’ in this research in the sense that I had prior experience with the organization or the public sector in general; however, I also did not treat this context as a field for ethnography, as I was employed in the organization as part of my research and was expected to contribute to the organization.

Ethnography is grounded in the belief that the basis of knowledge lies in interpersonal relations (McGranahan, 2018), thus requiring the establishment of relationships with interlocutors or informants; in turn, this requirement embeds the researcher in a ‘web of relations’ (Werth & Ballesteros, 2017) that already exist in the field in which the research is conducted, i.e., in this case, the ecosystem of actors in Østerbyen.

The close relationships with informants upon which the ethnographic approach relies and the insight that researchers always influence their informants, alongside the situation of industrial research, entail that this study cannot establish clear lines between ‘field’ and ‘home’. Bilgen and Fábos (2023) argued for a “deconstruction of the situated meanings of ‘the field’ and ‘home’” in ethnography, thereby promoting an understanding of the ‘field/home’ distinction that emphasize the fact that the beginnings and ends of both field and home are experienced as blurry by many ethnographers. Alvesson referred to this process of blurring as a ‘home-base’ for the concept of ‘self-ethnography’ (Alvesson, 2003, p. 176). “A self-ethnography is a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a ‘natural access’, is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher then works and/or lives in the setting and then uses the experiences, knowledge and access to empirical material for research purposes”. Although self-ethnography is a way of eliminating the time-consuming socialization process faced by the ethnographer, due to the fact that I studied highly familiar contexts, I experienced a process of socialization, as it was necessary for me to make MedVind my field/home.

04.02.02 The Pink Notebook: On Reflexivity, Positionality, Field Dilemmas, and Co-research

My presence and role in the field led to many reflections and dilemmas. Ethnography is an embodied practice (Gherardi, 2019; Thanem & Knights, 2019). You are there. You take up space in the room; you participate. The ethnographer is also present in the fieldnotes, which include self-reflective commentary and feelings (Emerson et al., 2001; Walford, 2009); furthermore, the ethnographer is often present in the writing through the use of the first person voice (Tracy, 2010). In my first few weeks of fieldwork, I carried a small pink notebook. Notetaking is a specific and widely discussed discipline within ethnography and can be performed in various ways (Atkinson, 2014; Emerson et al., 2001; Walford, 2009). Due to my experience performing fieldwork in places that lacked access to electricity, I preferred to take notes by hand. I did, however, soon realize that this form of notetaking ‘by hand’ was not necessarily ideal for my ethnographic efforts to become a natural part of the research setting (Emerson, 2009) as the following extract from fieldnotes shows:

The head of culture and pedagogics in the municipality, the chairperson of the steering committee in MedVind, is talking about the organization at a masterclass seminar on co-creation for leaders in the municipality. She is telling the story of how the partnership came to be, the knocking-on-doors story. She is pointing at me and saying “and then we have Karoline, our industrial PhD, always with her little annoying pink notebook—there she is! You can see that she is writing down what I am saying right now”.

She dislikes pink; she has mentioned that on several occasions. Her favourite colour is orange. Would it benefit my observations to have an orange notebook? Or maybe a more subtle one? I doubt it. It is not the colour but rather the presence of an observer: me. I doubt the consequences of the pink presence would change with if the pink notebook were replaced with a black one. It is also not my intention for my observations to be covert. They must always know that that is my role; I will have to continue to disclose it. I will change my notetaking style. I will write small notes on my phone and do end-of-day writings instead. I will take recordings when possible. I will make small sound clips for myself when I go to the bathroom.

At this moment, I decided that the pink notebook should be retired early. Although my intention was never for the observations to be covert, the pink presence of the notebook was loud and, to my surprise, it continued to be so even after its retirement. Over time, the mentions of the notebook became a ‘codeword’ between the

informants and the researcher. In this way, my informants could a) signal their awareness of the fact that they were observed and engage in self-reflection and b) help me, as a colleague, engage in the co-production of data and the co-creation of research.

The notebook became a symbol for my distinctive status within the organization, and every time I felt that I had become a full-fledged member of the organization, as is the intention in ethnographic fieldwork (Atkinson, 2014; Emerson, 2009), the pink notebook reminded the informants that my role was different from theirs, i.e., that I was also an observer. Initially, this role of ‘observer’ was mistaken for indicating an agenda focused on evaluation or assessments that was closely in line with the classic organizational ethnographic obstacle of being perceived as a ‘management spy’ (Van Maanen, 2011b).

References to the notebook became a nearly daily occurrence, even after I stopped bringing the notebook and changed my notetaking habits after the first weeks of this process. In conversation, informants would pause and say, “oh no; are you going to write this down?”. Such outbursts should be taken seriously, as ethnographic efforts are never helped when one’s presence is followed by an ‘oh no’.

Even three years after the beginning of the initial fieldwork period, when the pink notebook was present, I would engage in conversations during which informants suddenly became aware of my role or the sensitivity of the conversations in question; they would say “is this going in the pink notebook?” or “be careful in there! Karoline will write in her notebook that we don’t get along, and that’s why we’re not succeeding!”. These statements were made even by people who were new to the organization and had never seen the pink notebook referenced in this context; nonetheless, they would speak of it as a way to express their awareness of my presence as an observer.

At times, these outbursts were jokes, which were possible for the informants to make due to the relationships that I had with them, which were collegial and friendly; however, from my perspective, these outbursts were also indicators of the extent to which my presence and the pink notebook that I used in my first week had a virtually corrective influence on my informants. They became aware of their own manner of speaking. When they caught themselves referring to, for example, their work as a ‘project’ despite their work towards removing this understanding of MedVind, they would look at me and say, “oh no, notebook material”. When they used terms that were the result of the time they spent working as public employees, during which they used what they considered to be public bureaucratic language,

they would look at me and say, “oh no, notebook material”. My presence, participation and observations became a way in which they could engage in self-reflexivity due to the inspiration of the ethnographic gaze.

The informants became co-researchers; for example, after a meeting, they would ask me “did you count how many times x said partnership instead of alliance? Like this is only between the two partners”. Although I have never used counting as a deliberate method, the ways in which these actors spoke about the organization was always a key point. In this way, key informants became active in the process of data collection and generation, thereby not only offering me access to their observations but also allowing me to see, from their perspective, elements that they perceived as valuable data.

Not only did I become quite familiar with my key informants during this project, they also became familiar with me. Accordingly, even when I was cautious about writing fieldnotes directly in front of informants, I would at times unknowingly exhibit a slight smile when I observed something that I knew would make an interesting contribution to my dataset, something that was contradictory, or something that related to theory in an unexpected way. More than once, my informants detected such a slight smile on my increasingly familiar face and commented “what did you just see? Tell me what you are thinking about”.

These comments reveal that these informants were often actively engaged in the research and keenly aware of my observations. This situation led me to include key informants in not only the observations but also the preliminary analysis. For example, I informed them of things that I noticed as well as how I chose to include such things, thereby essentially inviting them to serve as coresearchers and engage in continuous dialogue throughout the fieldwork. Tracy (2010) referred to such cases as ‘member reflections’, in which context opportunities are provided for questions, critique, feedback, and affirmation, which represent possible ways of increasing qualitative credibility.

In this process, which involved member reflection and co-generated data, close relationships that I established with informants also resulted in uncomfortable situations. In one such situation, I was contacted by an informant via phone. She mentioned her concern that my data were already ‘too old’, namely, that they no longer represented her but had rather been a reflection of a specific moment in time that was now long gone. She was concerned that I would present her in my writing in a way that she did not like.

Another example occurred after a meeting, at which the following interaction occurred:

- Informant: I can tell that you are thinking about something. Tell me.
Me: Hmm. Well, it's just that in this meeting, I think that I observed something that adds to by understanding of what the backbone is, that, like, you are representing the chairmanship, the partners, more than you are representing the community actors.
Informant: I absolutely don't believe that is true!
Me: Okay. Do you want to elaborate on that, or do you want me to?

This interaction was followed by a conversation concerning the role played by backbone organization, relevant representations, my observations and ongoing analysis, and my informants' reflections on what I said as well as the informant's perspective. I attempted to overcome some of these challenges; by involving my informants throughout the study; for example, in these two situations involving uncomfortable encounters, I employed the strategy of member reflection in light of the intuition that these uncomfortable and awkward situations could be highly valuable with regard to improving my understanding of the situation at hand (Sløk-Andersen & Persson, 2020; Trigger et al., 2012). In both cases, I engaged in dialogue with the informants in question. I did not feel pressure to 'convince' them of my analysis, but I did want to inform them of how I had drawn that conclusion and how they would be represented in my writing; I also wanted to indicate that I was aware of the fact that statements, interviews and conversations were always a representation of a specific moment in time.

Throughout the fieldwork, I played various roles within the organization—namely, as a researcher, a critical friend, an expert, an observer, and an evaluator. Based on the inspiration of the work of Horlings et al. on place-based sustainability, I focused on the perception of being present in the field with my head, heart, hands and feet (Horlings et al., 2020). In terms of my feet, I was present and engaged in an embodied research practice. My hands were active through my participation in daily tasks pertaining to the backbone organization, my heart shared the overall purpose of the initiative, and my head sought to help contribute to change while simultaneously maintaining a balance between 'relationality' and 'criticality' (K. P. R. Bartels & Wittmayer, 2014)

These roles, among others, were articulated by me and my collaborators. Often, before meetings, we would agree on the role that I would play in specific situations. Would I be active? Would I instead play a backseat, observational role? In addition

to these roles that I played purposefully, I would accidentally acquire or unintentionally take on other roles (Gosovic, 2018), such as when I was identified by informants as an “expert on Collective Impact”.

I consider myself to have been engaged in a process of ‘becoming-with’ (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021; Gherardi, 2019) the organization, i.e., a process of growing and learning alongside it and as a part of it.

04.02.03 Ethical Reflexivity and Sincerity: Balancing Transparency, Anonymity, and Meso- Ethics

Throughout the study, I maintained a focus on sincerity as an ethical goal, which was indicated as achievable according to Tracy (2010) through a process of self-reflexivity, vulnerability, honesty, and transparency. This author defined sincerity in terms of authenticity and genuineness and emphasized the fact that the researcher must engage with others and be transparent about the goals, biases and joys and mistakes associated with the research (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). As this dissertation focuses on organizational ethnography, in which context an organization serves as both the research field and the site, ethical considerations at the meso-level (i.e., meso-ethics; Kristensen, 2023), were also highlighted. Unlike ethical reflections at the microlevel (i.e., the level of individuals) as well as those at a more meta-level (i.e., the level of society), meso-ethics pertain to the organizational level and the perception of the organization as an entity to which the principles ‘do no harm’ and ‘respect’ are applicable (Kristensen, 2023, p. 243).

Guba and Lincoln discussed how close relationships with informants can “produce special and often sticky problems of confidentiality and anonymity, as well as other interpersonal difficulties” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). These ‘sticky problems’ were relevant to this study. The process of anonymizing my informants was nearly impossible and thus represented grounds for ethical consideration throughout the research process. As an industrial PhD, I am obliged to disclose that I am employed by the organization that is the focal case of my study, and in a named organization featuring only four employees and in a situation in which members of the partner group and steering committee can be easily identified, it was never truly possible to anonymize my informants. Accordingly, it was necessary for me to protect my informants in different ways, such as by omitting noncrucial information about them or similar information provided by them. The anonymization of informants was

never a prerequisite for this research, as this research was initiated by the organization itself. However, this situation does not necessarily indicate that the individuals who made the decision to allow me to gain access to meetings considered situations in which this access might lead to uncomfortable situations for both the researcher and the informants, i.e., issues that it was necessary to negotiate and manage.

The following query led me to visit the questions repeatedly: Can you give voice to your informants without quoting them? For me, this task involved a process that focused on identifying 'noncrucial' information and using information in a way that highlighted meaning without 'outing' informants. With respect to the task of identifying information as 'noncrucial', I relied on ethical guidelines and dialogue with both ethnographic colleagues and my supervisors. These guidelines could entail leaving out foul language or unnecessary names. I have also used quotations only rarely throughout the dissertation for this reason; furthermore, when such quotations are used, I provide little to no information regarding the informants. Even simple information concerning informants' gender, age or organizational affiliation could allow the informants to be easily traced.

04.03 Iterative Approaches to Analysis: A Continuous, Reflexive Process

In ethnographic research, data collection and analysis form a continuous, intertwined process rather than serving as separate sequential stages. This process does not conform to the distinction between fieldwork, headwork and textwork, as presented by Van Maanen (2011). Data are not collected objectively in the field and then brought back to the researcher's desk for analysis. This process was further complicated by my position in the field, as my desk was, quite literally, situated in my field. In the words of Packer, "the raw data of ethnography are actually already cooked" (Packer, 2010, p. 225). Unlike more structured methodologies in the field of qualitative research, for example, the employment of ethnography as a mere method for data collection, ethnographic analysis begins at the moment when the researcher enters the field, when the research already has initial impressions that serve as preliminary analytical work. Decisions (whether made consciously or not) of what to write down as notes, which are ultimately aimed at supporting observations, are analytical acts that are shaped by the researcher.

Fieldnotes, ideas, and analysis are constantly intertwined with one another; furthermore, preliminary analyses and findings are pursued, abandoned, paused, and subsequently reintegrated into the analysis in an iterative manner. Accordingly, ethnographers almost never provide systematic descriptions of how they transition from their field notes to the research text (Van Maanen, 2010). In one article on the role played by ethnography in organizational development on the basis of a case study of a state court and a cancer treatment centre, Agar described his analysis as follows: “The next step: Analyze the data for patterns in the usual ethnographic way, this “usual way” being a systematic process beyond the limits of an article to describe” (Agar, 2010, p. 295).

As I immersed myself in the field with the broad goal of understanding Collective Impact, each observation, interaction, reading and reflection shaped my understanding and had the opportunity to inform subsequent observations and conversations. The ongoing nature of analysis in ethnography entails that research questions and focus areas may evolve as the researcher obtains deeper insights into the social world under investigation. In the process of transitioning between the observations and the literature on Collective Impact, three initial themes or strands of research (Pink, 2021) were notable and came to represent a source of continuous curiosity for me: the struggle of being or not being the municipality, the absence of systemic change and the invisibility of backbone work. These insights then became themes for further research and fieldwork, thus sharpening my attention towards these issues.

Ballesterio & Winthereik (2021), Varpio et al. (2017) and Packer (2010) brings attention to a flawed description of patterns, themes, etc., that ‘emerge’ from qualitative datasets; this term has been favoured in many descriptions of analytical methods. Throughout the literature on this topic, researchers have agreed that nothing appears magically, no matter how long the researcher stares at the data. Ethnographic analysis involves a creative process of generating insights through ‘systematized but messy labor’ (Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021, p. 3). I engaged in this messy labour in various ways, specifically through ethnographic hunches (Pink, 2011), holistic coding (Saldaña, 2021), and writing, as elaborated in the following:

Utoft (2020) mentioned the inability to identify specific moments of interpretations because of their fleeting and elusive nature. The same haziness characterized a great deal of my analytical process, which also offered revelatory moments, in which these fleeting interpretations persisted long enough for me to grasp them. Pink (2021) referred to these insights as ‘ethnographic hunches’, which refer to

moments of significance that are encountered in the field that one cannot shake and that ultimately inspire a specific analytical path.

When I coded the ethnographic material used in Article C, which focused on systemic change, I employed a holistic approach (Saldaña, 2021) that focused on reading and rereading to obtain a broader overview (p. 216). In practice, when I analysed these data, I searched for fragmentation, variation and contradiction just as much as I searched for patterns and recurrent themes (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011: 42).

With respect to Article A, I read and reread my material with the goal of identifying places, and I noted the absence of systemic change as articulations. I then printed and cut them out all of these insights and began to assemble piles of these various pieces of data that I felt were connected. I then mixed these printed pieces up once again to create new piles until I began to approach categorizations that made sense. This tactile form of coding was based on the protocol developed by Jones (2021), which is known as ‘categorize, recategorize, repeat’. This approach involves sorting and re-sorting the material as well as constructing and deconstructing the categories and the relationships between the research project and the researcher’s experiences and values, thus representing a form of data condensation and patternmaking

With regard to Article B (Backbone), I used a mix of in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2021), metaphorical coding and process coding. In vivo coding is a coding approach in which the informants’ own words are retained for the resulting coding scheme; in contrast, in metaphorical coding, are used as coding categories, while in process coding, actions are used as categories that are communicated through the use of -ing endings. I used a metaphorical in vivo approach to coding on the basis of quotations such as “we gather around tables”, which was transformed into the code ‘gathering around tables’, thus supporting a second round of coding with respect to the actions involved in the processes of gathering around tables.

Finally, the writing of this dissertation involved an analytical process, as ‘ethnography is writing’ (Humphreys and Watson 2009, p. 40). Accordingly, much of the analytical work performed for this research took the form of writing fieldnotes, particularly small notes that referenced theory. Atkinson referred to these notes as the ‘ideas’ that one incorporates into the analysis. Ideas to think with, are not only distinct theories but also concepts borrowed from other media. My notes also represent a form of analysis, as they contain analytical commentary, ideas, speculation, references to theories with which I am familiar, other conversations in which I have engaged, observations that I have made, or books that I have read. These notes are

in constant conversations with various ‘things’ outside the field. Writing was one way of constructing and deconstructing categories; accordingly, it involved a reflexive project of conversation between my data and my experiences in the field. In addition, the vast number of ‘drafts’ of my writing represent not only a draft of the presentation of the results but also analytical steps towards these results in their own right.

Abductive iterative analysis involves a dynamic, evolving process in which data interpretation occurs continuously throughout the course of fieldwork. This approach is inherently creative, as it requires the researcher to move back and forth between data and theoretical frameworks, thereby refining her understanding with each round of analysis. When I conducted my observations, I was both analysing and physically situated within the field, thus allowing various insights to emerge in real time and to be shaped by the immediate context. This iterative process can produce a rich, layered understanding but nevertheless feel boundless, in line with Van Maanen’s claim that analysis is “not finished, only over”. In the following chapter, I present the outcomes of this complex, sometimes “messy” process of analytic labour.

- PART TWO -

05 Findings

05.01 Article A: “We are not a project”: Social Innovation in the Public Sector through Collective Impact?

Karoline Duus Lindegaard

Abstract

This article explores the adaptation of the Collective Impact framework within a welfare state context, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Esbjerg, Denmark. The Collective Impact initiative “MedVind i Østerbyen” aims to increase social mobility in a socioeconomically challenged neighbourhood through a partnership between the municipality and a commercial philanthropic foundation, focusing on educational and employment outcomes for children and youth. By exploring how Collective Impact is enacted and analysing the meeting between on the one hand the community development framework for social innovation and on the other hand public administration, this study highlights the influence of the framing of the shared agenda on mobilization and engagement. The findings contribute to the understanding of Collective Impact as a tool for social innovation, revealing its complexities and potential when adapted for public sector-driven social innovation initiatives.

Introduction

In the socio-economically challenged area Østerbyen (the eastern part of the city of Esbjerg, Denmark) among employees in social purpose organizations, a story is being repeated. The story goes that the biggest risk of living here, is not that the community has been on the ghetto-list and is thus considered a more dangerous neighbourhood. Rather, the biggest danger is, that if you step outside your door, you are in danger of getting hit by a car full of project-workers. In this joke lies a critique of two things: the increasing number of initiatives in the community, and the ‘projectification’ (Jacobsson & Jatocha, 2021; Jensen et al., 2016; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014) when working with societal problems, a projectification that increasingly has become part of the public sector (Jacobsen, 2022). However, despite the presence of well-meaning projects by both municipality and non-profit organizations, the neighbourhood is still characterized by a number of challenges when focussing one’s attention to the children and youth living here. The area has a large group of youth outside of both education and the job market, and children are living with the consequences of a childhood in relative poverty. These are problems also drawing attention at national scale⁸.

With increasing attention to social innovation as an approach to collaboratively address some of these societal wicked problems (Bekkers et al., 2014; Bragaglia, 2021; Grimm et al., 2013), a partnership was established between the municipality and a commercial foundation, in an attempt to address the challenges in Østerbyen, in a way that was not ‘yet another project’. The framework Collective Impact was chosen due to its focus on mobilization of already existing resources and initiatives, and to catalyze collaboration between actors operating in the community, who all had overlapping goals and agendas.

The community-based framework Collective Impact with the goal of “...achieving systems-level changes in communities through coordinated multi-sector collaborations” (Kania & Kramer, 2011) has been embraced by many as a promising way to structure social innovation efforts (Mayan et al., 2020; Salignac et al., 2018). The Collective Impact approach builds on five conditions, that when present can let collaborations gain momentum and achieve large-scale social change: (i) common

⁸ <https://www.ae.dk/node/3441/pdf-export>

<https://www.ae.dk/node/3537/pdf-export>

agenda, (ii) shared measurement approach, (iii) mutually reinforcing activities, (iv) continuous communication, and (iv) backbone support. Building on the Collective Impact framework, an initiative was created in Østerbyen, with the intend to increase social mobility and minimize the consequences of child poverty through the shared agenda that ‘all children and youth find their way through education and into employment’⁹. Scholars have pointed to exactly multi-actor collaborations as the biggest potential for public innovation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018), and with growing pressure on welfare states and public sector services, the Collective Impact approach has found its way into the public sector toolbox for innovation in Denmark, despite its philanthropic and non-profit origin.

Collective Impact’s ability to provide structure for social innovation has gained attention and momentum amongst practitioners, also in Denmark, and has also started to be investigated in academic literature, primarily within the community development and non-profit fields (Cooper, 2017; Zuckerman, 2020). Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Collective Impact initiative in Esbjerg, this article adds to the social innovation in public sector literature by answering the following research question: How does the welfare state context affect the adaptation of Collective Impact as framework for social innovation and how does public sector leaders participate and contribute to Collective Impact?

This article offers insights into the adaptation of the Collective Impact framework in this Danish case, and into what happens when the originally American community development model of Collective Impact meets the Danish public sector’s need and responsibility to provide answers to social problems. Specifically, the municipal public sector, whose activities are influenced by the state’s initiatives and, to some extent, its finances, and by that disadvantaged residential areas are a politically sensitive issue with significant national political focus.

In the following section, the background for the emergence of Collective Impact in Denmark is described, followed by a review of contemporary research literature on Collective Impact and innovation in the public sector, to inform the discussion on Collective Impacts potential for social innovation. Then the methodological approach is presented alongside a description of the case and field context. The findings are divided into two sections showing the specific municipal universal welfare

⁹ Translated by the author from the Danish “Alle børn og unge i Østerbyen finder vej igennem uddannelse og i job”

state context's impact on the adaptation of Collective Impact and how leading public sector representatives understand, participate, and contribute to gaining collective impact. Ultimately, the article discusses Collective Impact as social innovation in relation to public sector and its implications for theory and practice.

The emergence of Collective Impact in Danish municipalities

Despite the reputation of the Danish welfare state and its access to free education and healthcare, with a population reporting high levels of happiness (World Happiness Report, 2023), the country still experiences challenges, also when it comes to children and youth. Recently political focus has been on declining life satisfaction, continuing social immobility challenges in relation to education, and continuing child poverty¹⁰. The political awareness of these grand challenges combined with administrative paradigmatic changes between Weberian traditional bureaucracy, new public management and new public governance (Sorrentino et al., 2018; Torfing et al., 2020), has left the municipalities open and interested in engaging with more socially innovative approaches.

The philanthropic association Realdania was the first to introduce Collective Impact in the Danish context, supported by Socialt Udviklingscenter (SUS), a Danish user driven innovation agency for social good. In 2014, they launched several initiatives with departure in the Collective Impact framework, within three broad collaborations; The countryside as a double resource, Built heritage in rural areas, Inclusion for everyone. Thematically, these first traces of the framework in the Danish context focused on the sharing of land and build environment, in line with the philanthropist history of the initiating foundation. Following was initiatives where child obesity, loneliness and homelessness were the societal challenges that the framework was intended to address. While they differed in their targeted issues, the number of actors involved, and whether they were nationally or locally anchored, they all shared the common trait of being partnerships between municipal public authorities and foundations.

¹⁰ <https://www.ae.dk/analyse/2022-01-store-kommunale-forskelle-i-omfanget-af-boernefattigdom#toc-f-rre-b-rn-vokser-nu-op-i-fattigdom>

Evaluations from the ended Danish CI's suggest that they have been considered successful and created indications of change but they also conclude that "in a Danish municipality context, the collective impact frame might be too ambitious at this point according to the existing distribution of roles among civil society, businesses community and municipality, where responsibility for the solution of societal problems to a high degree is placed at the municipality" (SUS, 2019). Even though Collective Impacts take on various forms within the small geographical space of Denmark, the above quote points toward investigating more in depth the impact of the Danish municipal universal welfare states on the potential for social innovation through Collective Impact.

Collective Impact has mainly been investigated in countries with residual welfare states where entitlements are directed towards the poorest, who are not able to manage on their own whereas Denmark can be characterized as a universal equality-oriented welfare state aiming at equal citizenship and social, political, and cultural life participation for all. Denmark is also characterized by being a decentralized welfare state in the sense that municipalities are responsible for the citizen-oriented services such as day care, schooling, elderly services, and activities related to getting people into jobs. Municipalities take up around 50% of the public sector tasks and budget distributed between the state, regions, and municipalities (The Ministry of the Interior and Health, 2005). In Denmark, services can be accessed by anyone who belongs to the target group in terms of age based on needs. This contrasts with other welfare state types where insurance or labour market affiliation is essential for coverage. A large part of the literature on Collective Impact, which Ennis and Tofa (2019) have reviewed, has a thematic overlap with Medvind i Østerbyen and concerns education for all, community development, health improvements, etc. However, it is clear from the review article that Collective Impact has mainly been used in a residual welfare state context (USA, Australia, Canada). This means that there is very little overlap in the literature so far, and Collective Impact in a welfare context has mainly been described in the grey literature except Johansen (2018) who has investigated Collective Impact in a Danish municipal context (Johansen et al., 2018) within the theme of land consolidation, and Lasgaard et al. (2023) with findings from the 'More Together' initiative to reduce loneliness.

Collective Impact as a framework for social innovation

Collective impact is defined in various ways in the literature. As 'a framework for achieving system-level changes in communities through coordinated multi-sector collaborations' (Christens & Inzeo, 2015), as 'large-scale social change efforts in

communities' (Wolff, 2016), as 'a method for network-based collaboration' (Salignac et al., 2018), as 'an approach to achieving large-scale social change' and as 'a model of social progress' (Kania & Kramer, 2011), (2011). Whether defined as an approach, model, or framework, it involves cross-sector, multi-actor collaborative work aimed at addressing complex, or wicked (Rittel & Webber, 1974) social problems. The term 'Collective Impact' appeared for the first time in a 2011 article by Kania and Kramer in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Kania & Kramer, 2011). The authors, employed by a consulting firm specialized in social change, presented compiled evidence from successful collaborative social change projects, and developed the mentioned 5-element framework based on their 'best practice' findings. The collective impact frame asserts that when these five conditions are present, collaborative initiatives can gain momentum and achieve large-scale systems change (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). Since Kania and Kramer named the collective impact method, it has been applied in many different country contexts - though mainly in the Global North. Examples of interventions that have been implemented using the Collective Impact methodology are child maltreatment in rural areas (Zuckerman, 2020), early childhood care (Tilhou et al., 2021), and veterans community navigation (Cooper, 2017). Although still scarce, the amount of academic literature on Collective Impact grows, and research has been concerned with community engagement (Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016), collaboration (Gillam et al., 2016), power and privilege (LeChasseur, 2016) and the backbone organization (DuBow et al., 2018). Concerned with sector-specific engagement in Collective Impact, Cooper (2017) study how non-profits participate in Collective Impact through Purdy's (2012) framework of assessing power in collaborative governance, and finds that Collective Impact conditions influence nonprofit participation through authority, resources, and discursive legitimacy.

Kania and Kramer have argued that "organizations have attempted to solve social problems by collaboration for decades without producing many results." (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 4). Of the failed collaboratives are mentioned public-private partnerships, that fails to include all stakeholders in a problem, multi-stakeholder initiatives lacking shared measurement and true alignment, and social sector networks being too short-term and ad hoc (Kania & Kramer, 2011). In contrast, they describe Collective Impact as "long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem", and how the shared actions are supported by "a shared measurement system, mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication, and are staffed by an independent backbone organization" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 4). As such, the framework is contrasted against other collaborative forms of partnerships, networks and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Most scholars agree on the potential of Collective Impact as

an approach but stresses the need for further research on established Collective Impact initiatives to deepen the understanding on specific groups of stakeholders (Mayan et al., 2020) and more empirical research (Boorman et al., 2023).

Social innovation in the public sector

Common to both social and public innovation, as opposed to most private innovation, is that it does not fit into the model of profit maximization but rather focuses on need-oriented outcomes, collaboration and co-creation, radically changed social interaction, and creation of public value as opposed to effectiveness and efficiency (Bekkers et al., 2014). According to Murray et al. (2010) social innovations are new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. Social innovation thus concerns how new ideas can emerge through combinations of resources, new collaborative relationships and networking (Cajal-Santana, 2014; Mulgan, 2006). Social innovation involves building on, but also breaking with the paths previously chosen. The way in which this is done can be through necessity-driven social innovation, where the involved actors adapt to the effects of the world around them, or opportunity-driven social innovation, where innovation acts more as a driver for change (Bosworth et al., 2016).

It can seem counterintuitive for social innovation to be described as something that can happen *in* the public sector, as social innovation is often explained as processes and practices aimed at meeting human needs neglected *by* the public sector (Galego et al., 2022; Jessop et al., 2013). The relation between public institutions and social innovation is therefore contested (Abad & Ezponda, 2022; Campomori & Casula, 2023). In some streams of literature, it is perceived as unsuitable for public sector to 'interfere' in social innovation, as many socially innovative initiatives are established to "overcome the bureaucratic rigidities of the public sector" (Campomori & Casula, 2023, p. 175). While other streams of literature highlight public sector's important role in social innovations, as the sector holds some important 'innovation drivers' such as high political and professional aspirations, access to expertise and scientific research and well-educated staff (Halvorsen et al., 2005; Torfing, 2016).

Social innovation has increasingly been adopted into the public sector as innovative approaches sought after, in the face of both economic pressure and complexity of welfare state challenges (Galego et al., 2022; Scupola et al., 2021; Voorberg et al., 2015). In the Danish context, the public sector entity which has this role is primarily the municipality according to the division of tasks in the Danish welfare state. Social innovation can be fostered through policy interventions that build innovative

capacity and create opportunity-driven processes. For this to happen, social innovation needs to be recognized in policy interventions and worked into both the design and evaluation criteria of such interventions. A recent study from Scupola et al (2021) presenting the public service innovation networks for social innovation (PSINSIs) highlights two roles public administration plays in innovation networks specifically, as co-producers, or as meta-governors. According to Fung and Wright (2001) and Edelenbos et al. (2020), the overall governance capacity and innovation power is expanded when focusing on results to be created in interaction between communities and authorities. However, it has been shown in some contexts that policy interventions and bureaucracy can inhibit social innovation rather than build momentum (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Igalla et al., 2019).

This may be due to the presence of various dominant governance logics that have characterized Danish municipalities in recent years, coupled with a relatively tight economy. Firstly, municipalities operate under the Weberian bureaucratic ideals of hierarchy, rules, writing, specialization, separation of positions from the private sphere, neutrality, and impartiality (Weber, 1995/1922) that underpin the democratic legitimacy of the municipal governance chain. Secondly, the municipalities are to a large extent influenced by a New Public Management-inspired ideal (Hood, 1991) of using intra-organizational management, economic incentives, and market forces in the management of public administration through free-choice schemes for services for citizens, outsourcing of some task areas as well as benchmark measurements of organizations' input/output performance. With these dominating governance logics, social innovation is at risk of becoming 'appropriated' by governments (Galego et al., 2022) as a way to cut costs of services. A recent publication uncovers the public sectors possibilities for social innovation and its coping strategies of co-creation in local governance, and proposes the case of 'constructive hybridization' thus introducing the possibility of mixing different management paradigms (Røiseland et al., 2024).

According to Sørensen and Torfing (2022) Collective Impact as framework for social innovation has gained the status of a "magic concept" (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011), and they predict that the implementation of it will likely enhance the production of innovative solutions (p. 43). They situate it among co-creation and Design thinking, as what they call 'Second-Order Innovative Processes' (p. 35), to broaden the theoretical perspective on public innovation, through a framework that supplements public policy by a second-order focus on processes, and a third-order focus on institutional design. Worth noting is that this perspective on Collective Impact is situating it as a means for public innovation, and not distinctively as social innovation in the public sector. While situating Collective Impact as second-order innovative

process, they argue for the necessity of both first-order innovative solutions, described as policies, regulation and services, and third-order innovative institutions, being platforms, eco-systems and arenas (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). The ideas of these orders of innovation, echoes the work of Ansell and Gash on collaborative platforms, as places offering both stability and flexibility (Ansell & Gash, 2018).

As of now, there is a momentum in Danish public administration development after the last 10 years or so of experimentation with various degrees of New Public Governance inspired steering "rooted firmly within organizational sociology and network theory" with the establishment of partnerships and co-creation and other forms of "inter-organizational relationships and the governance of processes" (Osborne, 2006, p. 384) somewhat in line with the principles behind the Collective Impact framework. Authors have argued that Danish public administration is well placed to adopt New Public Governance since Denmark is a country with a high degree of both general and institutional trust (Krogh & Lo, 2022). There is thus ongoing experimentation taking place with so-called 'unleashing' of the regulation of employees and service delivery at the municipal level in the Danish public sector. The need for 'unleashing' can be seen as an indication of that the Danish municipal welfare state still has certain problems in acting in an agile and supportive manner in relation to social innovation and of the ongoing work with creating possibilities for social innovation, away from the previous mentioned projectification.

Methods and materials

Ethnographic fieldwork has been the departure for unfolding how the welfare state context has affected the adaptation of the Collective Impact framework and exploration of how public sector actors participate in this framework for organizing. Ethnographic fieldwork is characterized by long-term engagement in the field and the researcher becoming a natural part of the fieldwork setting (Atkinson, 2014; Emerson, 2009), as such I entered MedVind i Østerbyen as researcher and colleague, to engage in the everyday work at a Collective Impact backbone office, participating in all parts of organizational everyday life, considering activities and interaction between the different levels of organization and the complexity of social relations that influenced that interaction, between actors from various levels and types of organizations.

Participatory observation was the primary data source, along with formalized and non-formalized interviews with backbone employees and interviews with partner group and steering committee members. The observations took place at steering committee meetings, meetings with actors in the alliance, meetings with the chairmanship, and involved interaction between backbone employees and the alliance

and between alliance members, and observations on informal conversations in the backbone setting and reflections on meetings. At meetings, the researcher took notes about the topic of conversation, about what was said, in what tone of voice, and informal communication. In the daily observations, notes were taken on the mood, the returning topics of conversations, the talk between backbone staff as preparations for meetings, and how they internally spoke of the alliance and their work as facilitators involving a large and steady organisations such as the municipality.

Interviews with partner group and steering committee were conducted in 2020 via Zoom. The circumstances of the Danish corona lockdown were the reason for the online conduct of interviews. Six of these were with steering committee and partner group members being public sector leaders, and specifically focused on their role in the alliance, their position and how they participated and expected to participate. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded using Zooms record function, and transcribed. The interviews also focused on Collective Impact and its perceived potential and challenges, how the interviewees worked with the framework in their own organizations and the various roles in the alliance.

Following the ethnographic approach, not only people have been used as sources of data in this research, but also documents, visual representation, and artefacts (Atkinson, 2014; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). Documents such as internal notes, bi-weekly reporting's to the chairmanship from the backbone, social media posts, external evaluations, strategic papers and job postings were also used as part of the ethnographic dataset.

The broad collection and longitude of data has allowed discrepancies between what is said and done to come forward, along with conflicting messages, and development of the organization's internal understandings of their work and role. To facilitate catalytic validity (Denzin et al., 2006), the researcher worked closely with informants, and the backbone staff informants have been presented with preliminary analysis, inviting them into a process of reflection of the observations as part of a co-productional practice of organizational ethnography (Down & Hughes, 2009).

Data addressing the first part of the research question on contextual adaptation were primarily drawn from the field observations, capturing the implementation process, evolving discourses, and informal interactions with backbone staff, as well as early initiative descriptions and job postings. The second part of the research question, focusing on the role of public sector leaders, was explored using data from interviews with leaders participating during the initiative's initial phase,

combined with observations from steering committee and partner group meetings, and both formal and informal exchanges between backbone staff and public sector participants.

Findings: A welfare state adaptation of the Collective Impact framework

In the following, findings are presented in two sections. First, how the Danish initiative has been built on the Collective Impact framework and how being partly public organization has both delimited and expanded the possibilities for the initiative, secondly how public sector actors have participated in the collaboration.

Building MedVind on the Collective Impact framework: To be or not to be the municipality?

Together, the Municipality and the Foundation have used the five-element framework of Collective Impact to build the initiative, MedVind i Østerbyen. They are organized around three structures: (1) a partner group serving as the formal board of the initiative, and is responsible for economy and financing the collaboration, strategy and formal organizing of the alliance, (2) a steering committee consisting of important stakeholders and actors from the community from all sectors, and (3) a shared backbone office (for an overview of the organization see table 1). Besides the formal organizing of MedVind more than fifty local actors are considered to have participated in the alliance work throughout the years, through specific efforts, pilot projects, workshops and collaborations. Currently 32 of these are listed on the MedVind website as ‘actors of the alliance’ (see appendix A)

While MedVind has applied each of the five elements of the framework, three are primarily affected by the welfare state context and affecting public sector actors’ participation: the shared agenda and the backbone.

In the north American adaptations of collective impact, the backbone responsibility is often placed within a participating non-profit organization, and reliant on external financial support through grant applications (Malenfant et al., 2019). In the case of MedVind, the independently staffed backbone is an organization under the Municipality, legally and financially anchoring it in the municipal administration, funded 50% through municipal budgeting and 50% by the Lauritzen Foundation. The backbone staff is employed by the municipality, and they participate in obligatory

employer satisfaction measurements. Although being part of the municipality they have no service responsibilities towards citizens.

Table 2 Overview MedVind organizing

PARTNER GROUP	STEERING COMMITTEE	BACKBONE
Chairman, Lauritzen Fonden	Senior Vice President, Lauritzen Fonden	Backbone Leader
Director, Lauritzen Fonden	Head of Culture, Esbjerg Municipality	Special Consultant
Director, Children and Culture, Esbjerg Municipality	Director, Business Esbjerg	Analysis Consultant
Director, Citizen and Labour Market, Esbjerg Municipality	Leader, Volunteer House Vindrosen	Industrial PhD candidate
Chairman, Children and Family Committee, City Council	Chief of projects, Helhedsplanen	
Chairman, Culture and Leisure Committee, City Council	School principal, Urbanskolen	
	Jobcenter Leader. Esbjerg Municipality	
	Area leader for daycare Eastern City, Esbjerg Municipality	
	School Principal, Ung Esbjerg	
	School Principal, FGU West	
	Leader, GAME Street-Mekka Esbjerg	
	Assistant Manager, SOSU Esbjerg	

The placing of the Backbone within the public sector has practical administrative reasons, as the municipality holds a large amount of data on children collected through public institutions professional staff such as teachers and pedagogues. With the Backbone being able to access these data and handle them in accordance with GDPR law and regulations through obligatory staff training, the alliance can

track progress within the community, without having to spend resources to collect data themselves.

From the very beginning and continuously throughout the fieldwork, and thus over a four-year period, MedVind actors and founders have spoken about, and presented themselves, in changing ways. In the beginning the term “movement” was used repeatable, alongside “initiative” and always as result of a “partnership” as reference to the initiating and partner group. Then the discourse changed, towards being a “coalition” or an “alliance”, that is still the primary term used. Sometimes the initiative actors were described as a “network”. Because of the relatively permanent backbone (having secured a 12 year funding), MedVind is also considered an “organisation” primarily due to the establishing of the backbone as meta-organization (Fox et al., 2023; Lynn et al., 2015). The continuous struggle for definition brings forward the understanding of MedVind as having an organizational form the actors have not previously been familiar with., and therefor requires

Throughout the findings, ‘cross-sectoral collaboration’ is emphasized to bring forward the understanding of an initiative that does not have home in a specific sector but exist across the public, private and non-profit sphere. The ‘sector’ perspective is emphasized over cross-organizational, as much of the understanding of the necessity is that all sectors, and not just multiple organizations, are to be included for this to work. This struggle of self-identification was a result of the struggle of understanding what Collective Impact was, but also because to those not a part of MedVind the sentence “we are a Collective Impact initiative” meant very little and offered little explanation as of to what MedVind was. They were however always a ‘cross-sectoral collaboration’ and never a ‘project’, and a returning concern were, if the alliance, and especially the backbone organization that represented it, were the municipality or not?

The alliance experienced being funded and founded partly by the municipality to have both delimiting and expanding possibilities for the Collective Impact framework as departure for carrying out social innovation in the local context. In the early days and establishing years of the alliance, the backbone of the initiative was located at the local school, spoken of as the ‘epicenter of the initiative’. This also caused a returning concern already in 2020 of being perceived as the municipality due to the location at the school. Having an educational focus in the shared agenda and physically being at the school, resulted in the backbone being perceived as a philanthropic funded support for the school rather than a broader community-driven initiative and cross-sector alliance, with both the municipality, and philanthropic foundation as actors.

These perceptions and initial challenges led to a process of ‘de-municipalization,’ where the backbone team consciously sought to distance themselves from being seen solely as a municipal entity. This identity-building process was crucial for expanding the initiative’s reach beyond the silos of public sector involvement and fostering a more inclusive sense of shared responsibility across sectors. First and foremost, they moved away from the location at the school, and into office spaces at a newly established community center, and they hired a communication employer to help develop a visual identity and stronger online presence and ensure the external legitimization of the alliance.

Informant’s points to the role of the other founding partner, the foundations, as the balancing role of securing the balance in both being and not being the municipality. As one actors expresses: “my biggest concern is really that, if you take it [the foundation] away then the municipality, this huge bureaucratic machine, will start to take over. And I think that’s where Collective Impact is most important, to signal to us, the municipality, to take a step back”, they further add, when asked what it means to ‘take a step back’: “I have to unite this hierarchical thinking with this ‘flat’ thinking in MedVind. It’s contrasted, it’s hard to overcome, that you, as the municipality have to give up power”. Another actor adds to this perspective of giving up hierarchical power, by emphasizing an experience of leaning into chaos: “It would have been easier to just stay in what we know, the hierarchy, it is safe, I know the chain of command, participating in MedVind, to me, that has also led to more chaos, than the order that I am so used to”.

Being a ‘muscle’ was highlighted as an important power factor to balance out this municipal influence and power by several actors: “It matters that there are some muscles in this that we normally don’t have in the municipality”. Another actor adds: “it stands out having a foundation in collaboration like this, something we can’t do ourselves, it is in many ways, excuse my language, extremely annoying, but they insist to *get things done*”. A final important insight into the role the foundation plays in balancing out the power that lies in being the municipality “well, I must confess, its easier to get the mayor to listen when the Lauritzen Foundation is there. I mean, he’ll listen to me always, its just, its something else to have the foundation there”. The foundation partner is perceived to

The municipal involvement provided access to essential resources, including data, political support, and insights into the public sector system the alliance sought to challenge. These ties enhanced the alliance’s ability to experiment with new ideas, using the legitimacy afforded by the municipality. For instance, access to municipal

data allowed the Collective Impact initiative to be more evidence-driven, which participants identified as a distinctive feature compared to other collaborative efforts, labelled as co-creation, they had engaged in previously.

The initiative could be said in the Danish municipal context to have a change-making impact in the way that it is perceived by actors in the alliance to be inevitable that the anchor of the initiative is within the public sector, believing that “you can’t change anything without working closely with the municipality”, while at the same time highlighting that it cannot be fully integrated into the municipality, but needs to be working ‘on the edge’ of public administration.

Public sector as perceived sustainability: the long-term commitment

One of the key insights from the ethnographic material is that the municipal ‘anchoring’ of the initiative, offered a sense of stability and legitimacy to the alliance. Informants emphasized that the municipality’s involvement ensured a long-term commitment to the initiative, which contrasted sharply with previous experiences in cross-sector collaborations, often marked by short-term funding cycles and lack of enduring impact. As one participant noted, “We don’t need any more UFOs coming in from Copenhagen, doing what they think is good for our community and then leaving after a four-year project.” This sentiment highlights the value participants placed on local sustainability and continuous involvement rather than transient, externally imposed projects.

In addition to practical support, the municipal connection fostered a belief in the long-term viability of the alliance. Participants frequently mentioned the sense of “forankring” (anchoring), which they attributed to the municipal ties. This local grounding provided not only resources but also a political commitment that many felt was critical for the alliance’s sustainability. “I often hear from other forums with municipal actors, that they speak of MedVind like it is a project, like all other projects. MedVind is not a project, it’s almost like a catalyst”, another actors echoes this perspective: “This is not a project, it is something more, something lasting, something that makes sure that 1 + 1 equals more than 2”. Projects are defined by many aspects, other than temporality (Jacobsen, 2022; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014), but in this study, informants have experienced projects as short-term fixed time-periods, externally induced by ‘outsiders’ and resulting in knowledge being lost after end project-periods without plan or possibility of knowledge-transfer. An actor explains how the previous experienced projects have affected engagement: “In other co-creation projects I have participated in, the time restraint has been an excuse for people to kind of get out of it, avoid the work”. The actors of MedVind I

Østerbyen perceive the alliance and the Collective Impact framework as an antidote to this, as something that is anchored firmly in local government, and mobilizing already existing resources, described by one actor as “an insane amount of project-money flying around” in a local community. More than that, the idea of anchoring is not just about having ties, but as something that exist within the municipality’s bureaucracy and ‘drift’, that is the maintenance and operation of the backbone organization.

While the public sector ties introduced challenges related to perception, they also facilitated a supportive environment for experimentation and social innovation. The municipal backing provided legitimacy for the alliance to test new approaches to social issues, an opportunity that participants valued highly. Municipal involvement also meant access to the systems the alliance aimed to change, enabling participants to leverage existing structures while simultaneously attempting to innovate within them. This duality is what is highlighted in social innovation literature as the ‘systems paradox’ (Pel et al., 2023), in which social innovators are trapped in reproducing the systems they are attempting to disrupt.

Despite the benefits of municipal anchoring, participants also highlighted significant challenges. A recurring theme was the struggle to dissociate the initiative from the public sector, even though it was partly municipally funded. Many participants expressed concerns that being too closely associated with the municipality might limit the alliance possibilities: “Well. Like, I think that maybe MedVind and the backbone office should be attentive to the fact that you don’t become... I mean, you are really close with Esbjerg Municipality, it is bound to the municipality, so you are not... they are not free”. This idea of being ‘free’ from the municipality was a recurrent theme. As one backbone employer reflected, “How am I supposed to convince people that I am not the municipality, when it says so right there in my email signature?!” This seemingly minor administrative issue became symbolic of a larger challenge: distinguishing the initiative’s identity from its municipal roots to broaden its appeal to all actors in the community. This was especially problematic in terms of establishing shared responsibility and commitment for the Collective Impact agenda, as potential partners might view the initiative as simply an extension of municipal bureaucracy as explored in the next section, and how public sector actors participate in Collective Impact.

Public Sector actors’ participation in Collective Impact

Having established how the Collective Impact framework can be adapted to the public sector, we now turn our focus to how public sector actors participate in and

contribute to collaborative efforts. The extent and manner of public sector participation are heavily influenced by the shared agenda. At first glance, the shared agenda - ensuring that all children and youth successfully navigate the education system and transition into the job market - implies clear roles for public institutions, such as job centers and schools and educational institutions.

While mobilizing stakeholders around this shared agenda, combined with narratives highlighting the impacts of child poverty, initially proved successful, sustaining active engagement in the alliance beyond this mobilization stage was more complex. The shared agenda's scope, encompassing areas of direct responsibility and related services, created a divide among alliance participants. Some actors came from organizations closely aligned with the shared agenda, while others had more peripheral connections to it. This alignment influenced participation, with some actors fully committing ('leaning in') due to the relevance of the agenda to their core responsibilities, while others maintained a more distant, "lean-back" stance. This dynamic underscores that the shared agenda was not uniformly central to all participants, leading to varied levels of engagement and investment.

When contrasting public sector actors with non-public sector participants, a clear pattern emerged. Public sector actors often assumed the role of "owners" of initiatives, while non-public actors played supportive roles. This ownership sometimes led to tensions, as public sector participants navigated overlapping jurisdictions and responsibilities. Some public sector actors embraced the alliance as a means to strengthen their own organizations and engaged actively: "strategically, if there is anything I want to succeed with, then I work with them". Public sector leaders valued these resources, such as data reports, knowledge of best practices, and access to facilitators, because they addressed gaps in their own time, funding, and expertise. As a result, while their actions aligned with the alliance's broader objectives, their motivations remained tied to their institutional priorities rather than collective, community-focused social change. Others, however, perceived the alliance as overstepping its bounds "making projects on our behalf" as one informant puts it, viewing external actors as taking control of projects that fall within their domain: "We have experienced a lot that we were running after other people's ideas, because they had ideas on our behalf" or as another actor expresses it: "I keep experiencing that other actors have agendas for us, overstepping".

This balancing act was further complicated by the expectation within the original Collective Impact model that top leaders, those with the power to effect change, should participate (Kania & Kramer, 2013). In the context of a robust public sector, this often resulted in many steering committee members being public sector

leaders, chosen for their assumed capacity to drive institutional change relevant to the target group. In the case of MedVind, many steering committee members were indeed public sector leaders invited to participate based on their perceived influence. However, analysis reveals that these leaders' participation was primarily motivated by the resources offered by the backbone organization rather than by a proactive commitment to fostering social change. This was evident during steering committee meetings, where public sector leaders frequently referred to the backbone organization in ways that would position them as those responsible for change, distancing themselves from the alliance's collaborative efforts and shared ownership: "To me, MedVind is the backbone" This dynamic suggested that they did not see themselves as integrated members of the Collective Impact initiative but rather as beneficiaries of the resources it provided. One actor with a core service delivery closely related to the agenda, speaks of their participation as determined by what they can "get help for".

This approach diverged from the original Collective Impact model, where public sector leaders are expected to act as collaborative change agents. In MedVind, public sector leaders often engaged with the alliance to further their own organizational needs rather than to drive shared, community-oriented initiatives. While the intent of working through Collective Impact is to avoid individual agendas and isolated efforts, it has proven difficult. The concept of 'shared passion' described by Tilhou et al. (2020) and 'shared ownership' as discussed by Mayan et al. (2019) was not fully realized.

All in all, the public sector leaders participate by perceiving the backbone as the organization and a representation of the partnership between the municipality and the foundation, utilizing it as a place to access resources: Local knowledge (what's going on in the area?), data (about population and best practices), legitimacy (municipal priority and political awareness), innovation and experimentation, weakening their perception of themselves as change-makers and the bearers of responsibility due to the formal organizational structure.

Discussion and conclusion: Collective Impact as framework for social innovation in the public sector

Bryson et al. (2006) note that interorganizational collaborations that span public, private and not-for-profit sectors are inherently 'difficult to create and even more difficult to sustain' (p. 52). The public sector's significant role in Collective Impact provides the initiative with this hard-reached sustainability. In the welfare state

context, the Collective Impact framework is not grassroots organizing or bottom-up community development, but rather becomes a way for the municipality to scaffold and provide permanent infrastructure for local engagement in social innovation experimentation. This makes MedVind, although built on the Collective Impact framework that has served as departure and structure, the municipality dedicating resources for innovation capacity within a challenged community, with a specific demographic focus being the children, with support from a philanthropic foundation. The municipality provides infrastructure that ensures sustainability through top-leader involvement, political legitimacy, access to public data, and the foundation provides funds, methodological and structural legitimacy.

To preserve the integrity of the Collective Impact framework in universal welfare state contexts, it is crucial to strike a balance between leveraging public sector resources and ensuring that all participants, including non-public actors, feel equally responsible and motivated for the shared agenda. Therefore, I suggest that the shared agenda should be framed as a mission that has no direct, or obvious 'home' in any specific public organization, as this study find that this risk the actors to perceive themselves as either someone who help the organization owning the agenda or being an actor that is given help from the other actors, and thereby risk reinforcement of 'silo-thinking'. Implementing a framework like Collective Impact requires careful consideration of the impact of strong public sector dominated partnerships. On the one hand, the close collaboration between public sector actors allows for better understanding, shared language, and smooth operation within the same system. However, it may also create an overly comfortable environment, perpetuating existing hierarchies and power dynamics. In the case of MedVind, the partnership is perceived as the owner of the backbone and, subsequently, the owner of the alliance. This perception may lead to an attribution of responsibility for the alliance's success or failure solely to the public sector partner. Some public sector leaders within the MedVind initiative may not fully embrace their roles as systemic change makers, limiting the extent to which structural and transformative changes can be incorporated into their respective organizations.

Theoretically, the MedVind's case provides insights into adapting the Collective Impact framework within a public sector environment, offering valuable contributions to the social innovation literature. By aligning with public sector goals yet operating as a semi-independent platform, MedVind demonstrates a new model of public sector-anchored social innovation. Its structure suggests a departure from traditional Collective Impact approaches, showing how Collective Impact can serve as a scaffold for systemic change without imposing direct service obligations. MedVind's focus on mobilizing existing resources and anchoring long-term

processes within municipal structures extends CI's applicability beyond traditional community-driven initiatives, introducing a model where Collective Impact functions as a public sector-backed infrastructure for sustainable innovation. While social innovation is, in the words of Campomori and Casula to 'overcome' the bureaucratic rigidities of the public sector (2023), then social innovation somewhat orchestrated by the public sector, like the case of MedVind through Collective Impact, becomes a way for the sector itself to address, and be challenges in, their own internal bureaucratic rigidities.

For public sector literature on social innovation, MedVind offers a critical empirical contribution: it reveals how Collective Impact frameworks, when adapted within public sector-dominant contexts, may transform from informal networks into formalized organizational structures. The case of MedVind highlights that while such adaptation offers resources and legitimacy, it also risks reinforcing hierarchies and diminishing community voices, especially when the public sector assumes both funding and organizational control.

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Appendix A: the current actors of the alliance



05.02 Article B: Coffee-drinking change-making: The invisible work of systemic change in a Collective Impact backbone organization

Karoline Duus Lindegaard

Abstract

Purpose The purpose of the article is to explore what actions backbone organizational staff engage in to enable systemic change through social innovation.

Design/methodology/approach The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in a Danish backbone organization that was part of a Collective Impact (CI) initiative between a municipality and a commercial foundation.

Findings The article finds that invisible systemic change is enabled through equally invisible enabling actions by the backbone organization. It illustrates this through presenting six ‘sayings’ that backbone staff use to speak of their work when operating in a sphere of invisibility.

Originality/value With a growing interest in cross-sectoral collaboration, this article contributes by expanding knowledge on the importance of ‘secretariate’ organizations of cross-sector collaborative efforts.

Keywords: backbone organization, systemic change, invisible labour, emotional labour, Collective Impact

Introduction

On paper, the role of a Collective Impact backbone organization is to coordinate and facilitate change-making efforts, but in situations in which backbone staff are asked to explain or speak of their work, the response is most often ‘Well, we drink a lot of coffee.’ Collective Impact (hereafter CI) is a framework used for cross-sectoral collaboration for social innovation through partnerships for systemic change with a community focus (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Part of the Collective Impact five-element framework is to establish a ‘backbone’ organization alongside 1) a shared agenda, 2) shared measurement, 3) aligned activities, and 4) continuous communication.

When establishing a partnership, a coordinating support infrastructure, or linking mechanism, is believed to significantly increase the chances of successful collaboration (Bryson et al., 2006; Holmen, 2013). Coordination across sectoral and organizational divides is expected to take considerable resources, time, and skills. According to Kania and Krammer (2011), “the expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting organization is one of the most frequent reasons why [collaborations] fail” It is, however, found unlikely that participating stakeholders will have the resources to carry out these coordinating tasks (Mendis & Decker, 2022).

In Denmark’s fifth largest city, Esbjerg, Collective Impact has been the point of departure for a partnership between a municipality and a commercial foundation. This partnership has created the initiative MedVind i Østerbyen [TailWind in the eastern city], with the shared agenda that “all children and youth in the eastern city find their way through education and into the job market”¹¹ in the socio-economically challenged eastern area of Esbjerg. As part of the initiative, the two partners have founded and funded a shared backbone organization.

Although the literature on backbones and the like in cross-sector collaboration and social innovation is emerging, it most often deals with the more tangible and external role of the backbone organization (see e.g. DuBow et al., 2018; Mayan et al., 2020). Little is known about how this role is carried out behind the scenes, not only in relation to the collaborative mission, but also towards the achievement of

¹¹ Translated by the author from the Danish agenda “Alle børn og unge i Østerbyen finder vej gennem uddannelse og ind i beskæftigelse i 2030” <https://medvind-oesterbyen.dk/om-medvind/baggrund>

systemic change. This article explores what the more intangible element of the backbone role consists of and how backbone staff operate in a sphere of invisibility to become an infrastructure contributing to social innovation and systemic change. The guiding research question is: What kind of ‘backbone’ actions emerge in the cross-sector collaboration MedVind in the Eastern City, and how do they enable social innovation for systemic change? In this article, I use the concept of ‘invisible labor’ in relation to that of ‘social innovation/systemic change’ to understand and expand knowledge about the ‘secretariate’ organizations of cross-sector collaborative efforts. By means of long-term ethnographic work in a Collective Impact backbone organization, the findings uncover the actions undertaken by the backbone in the pursuit of systemic change as identified in the ethnographic material.

Understanding the backbone role in relation to systemic change and invisible work

An organizational spine

Elements that distance Collective Impact from other cross-sector collaborative efforts are the explicit establishment of a backbone (Zuckerman, 2020) and the framework’s rooting in systemic change (Mayan et al., 2020). The backbone organization of a collaboration is illustratively described as the spine to which all actors are attached, a linking mechanism (Zuckerman, 2020), an intermediary (Lynn et al., 2015), or even glue (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016.). The backbone can either be appointed from among the participating organizations, or it can be established separately as an independently staffed organization (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). The backbone holds no formal authority over the collaboration and participating actors but still serves as a leadership structure (Wolff, 2016).

Across the literature, the backbone carries out an administrative role, providing an infrastructure for collaboration through facilitation, support, and leadership for the collaboration across the participating actors (Gillam et al., 2016; Mayan et al., 2020; Raderstrong & Boyea-Robinson, 2016). It is a managerial, logistical, and administrative support organization that in many ways carries the “operational burden of the CI” (DuBow et al., 2018, p. 258). A ‘movement building’ perspective in the backbone had been added by DuBo, expanding the understanding towards more relational outcomes in which the backbone is expected to “educate, build trust, provide a forum for difficult conversations, support members’ efforts, and, ultimately, empower members to become change agents” (2018, p. 258).

Maintaining collaboration between diverse actors, each with a distinct, often competing, interest, is described as a daunting task (Dubow, 2018, p. 257). According to Huxham and Vangen (2009), a collaborative advantage can only be achieved if the relationships between actors are managed. Nichols (2019) and Malenfant et al. (2019) even highlight how backbone employees are at risk of burnout due to the emotional drain of the work to maintain good relations with, and between, the diverse actors who are essential for creating CI.

Systemic change

Social innovation, understood as innovation that is social in both its process and outcome (Mulgan, 2006; Murray et al., 2010), is largely tied to the pursuit of systemic change: that is, the intent to fundamentally transform the structures, patterns, and underlying norms of a system (Clarke et al., 2018). Westley (2010) proposes that social innovation is defined “those processes, products, and initiatives which profoundly challenge the system that created the problem that they seek to address” (p. 2).

In the Collective Impact literature, systemic change is explained through a framework presented in the article “The Water of Systems Change” by Kania et al. (2018), inspired by Meadows (Meadows, 2001, 2008). In the article, the authors take inspiration from Meadows’ system thinking ‘iceberg’ concept and present a model, the inverted iceberg (Figure 1), illustrating the conditions for systemic change. The article is primarily aimed at practitioners interested in creating systemic change and is intended as an “actionable model” (Kania et al., 2018, p. 3) to support institutions in the development of system change strategies.

The model consists of six conditions that are argued to hold the system in place (Kania et al., 2018) and can thus be targets for change. These are referred to by Meadows as leverage points (D. Meadows, 2001) and more recently in the works of Grewatsch, in relation to strategic management, as tipping points (2023). The image of the inverted iceberg concept is intended to evoke the visualization that some conditions for change, the deepest conditions, are hidden below surface. The condition for systemic change is divided into three levels according to visibility: structural change, relational change, and transformative change.

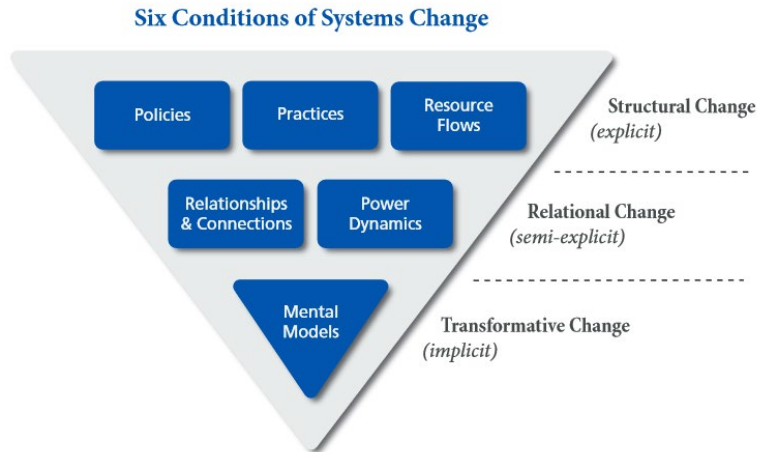


Figure 4. Six conditions for System Change (Kania et al., 2018)

Above the surface, policies, practices, and resource flows are areas where systems can shift structurally (Kania et al., 2018). This level involves changes in regulations, organizational rules, procedures, guidelines, and the allocation of monetary resources, knowledge, and information (Kania et al., 2018). It is at this level that social sector actors have primarily focused their change-making efforts. The semi-explicit conditions include relationships, connections, and power dynamics, involving connections among system actors, decision-making power, and formal or informal influence. The most implicit conditions are transformative changes in mental models—underlying assumptions, beliefs, and mindsets that drive actions and behaviors in a system (Dylan, 2014; Vink et al., 2018).

Invisible emotional work in social innovation

Relationships, relationality, and relationship-building have become a central concern in an era of network governance (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020). Within public sector administration, relations are central in a growing number of studies of network governance, partnerships, and co-creation, all under the umbrella of New Public Governance. Social innovation is also a part of this relational/collaborative turn and is also often the type of innovation to which public sector organizations subscribe (Bekkers et al., 2014; Voorberg et al., 2015). Relationships are continuously emphasised as necessary factors in collaborations pursuing social change, with trust

being an essential part of this (George et al., 2024). Research continuously points to relations as being of top importance in Collective Impact (Gillam et al., 2016; Hanleybrown et al., 2012; Mayan et al., 2020), but relations are perceived as a precondition, or antecedent, for the collaborative work and not as direct action towards systemic change.

Waddock (2020) draws attention to how feminist theories are used to unpack the emotional dimension of governance practice, pointing towards the relevance of bringing in perspectives of invisible labour in the investigation of actions that a backbone takes in its contributions to systemic change through social innovation. Invisible labour is a term coined in 1987 by Daniels (1987) to categorise women's unpaid labour, housework, and emotional labour, work that has been culturally and economically devalued. Although not limited to domestic or specifically women's work, volunteer work has also been analyzed as invisible labour because of its non-economic nature, as it is unpaid (Hatton, 2017). The concept has since been extended by feminist scholars to also be used in situations where work is paid but has more focus on care and emotional work, particularly within the health and care sectors (see Kirk, 2023).

The unpacking of the empirical material in the Results section will show how this article seeks to make a stronger connection between the contribution from the relational, inter-personal, and emotional work and the contributions to systemic change. It intends to make conversation between the concept of 'invisibility', as understood in the intangible conditions of transformative change within the framework of systemic with 'invisible labour' from feminist theory and argues for the importance of understanding the 'invisible value' of facilitating practices in cross-sector collaborative efforts.

Method

The article is based on extensive organizational ethnographic fieldwork with the aim of broadening the understanding of backbone actions enabling change in cross-sector collaboration, with a point of departure in the Danish MedVind alliance and framed according to the Collective Impact approach. Organizational ethnography is an approach that views an organization as a ethnographic field of interest (Yanow, 2012; Ybema et al., 2009). It engages the researcher in the complexities of everyday practice in organizational settings by uncovering how people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations (Van Maanen, 2011; Ybema et al., 2009).

The case

Part of the Collective Impact initiative and partnership between the municipality and the foundation was the agreement to establish a shared backbone, funded 50/50 by the two partners. The backbone was an organization anchored in the municipality, with three staff members and an office at a local community centre but with no public service responsibilities. As such, the backbone was not a public, private, nor an NGO type of organization but existed as a hybrid somewhere between public administration and non-profit.

Data generation

The data used in this article were generated through fieldwork which took place between February 2020 and September 2023, based on periods of participation in the everyday life in the backbone organization as part of an industrial PhD research collaboration between the University and the municipality. The qualitative data were collected through five data-generating opportunities, as illustrated in Table 1, in an abductive manner, continuously going back and forth between data and theory.

Table 3 Data-generating opportunities (source: authors own work)

PLACES	Ethnographic observations in the backbone office
PEOPLE	Conversations, formal and informal. Both retrospective and ongoing. 16 formalized semi-structured interviews with steering committee members, partner group members and backbone staff.
PERFORMANCE	Key situations and events where an external presentation of the organization took place.
PARTICIPATION	Projects, steering committee meetings, partner group meetings, evaluation meetings, strategy meetings, study trips, seminars.
PAPER	Documents: Partnership agreement, theory of change, job postings for backbone staff, evaluation agreements, external evaluation, funding application, reports to chairmanship.

During these data-generating opportunities, attention was paid to moments in which the backbone employees spoke about their roles, tasks, responsibility, dilemmas, unease, and frustration, as well as moments of celebration, happiness,

and ease (Atkinson, 2014). In particular, the uncovering of the paradoxical role that the backbone had was in focus: a role that is silent, intended to lift others, operate behind the scenes, not taking credit while at the same time being looked at as being responsible for change and evaluated as such. It was this paradox that prompted me to analyse how to understand these invisible actions that the backbone staff were engaged in.

Analytical approach

Two groupings of data were used for the analysis: a list of backbone activities and a list of backbone sayings, both extracted from the pool of data from the data generation opportunities in Table 1. Backbone employees would often resort to the use of various sayings as metaphors for and as explanations of their work. These sayings offered a way of understanding and uncovering the more unconscious and intangible tasks of facilitating change, as well as the complexity of and non-existent language for many of the tasks and actions carried out by the backbone. Six sayings were identified, which became categories for the coding of the material of backbone actions, in a mix of process-, in vivo-, and metaphorical coding (Saldaña, 2021). Using the backbone employees' own vocabulary for what they 'do', I thus attempted to uncover the meanings and invisible value of different tasks and how they contributed to the pursuit of systemic change. Since anonymization was a challenge in a small, named, organization, member checks were used for obtaining the participants' consent of how they were represented in the analyses (Thomas, 2017) and as a place for reflexive elaboration (Tracy, 2010).

Results: Three levels of backbone sayings supporting actions towards systemic change

Six sayings emerged as a representation of key backbone actions in the ethnographic material.¹² Each saying was categorized in one of the three levels of conditions for systemic change to respond to the research question: "What kind of 'backbone' actions emerge in the cross-sector collaboration MedVind in The Eastern City, and how do they enable social innovation for systemic change?"

¹² The 'sayings' have been directly translated from Danish: 'to gather a table'/'gathering tables' is a direct translation, but the meaning is more about gathering people *around* tables than about assembling furniture.

Structural change through tangible actions

Diving into data

Data holds a central place in Collective Impact as often considered a data-driven form of co-creation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). The backbone is tracking the progression goals that the alliance has set towards achieving the population level outcomes based on the shared agenda. Part of ‘diving into data’ is to explore the available data, scan for places of challenges and opportunities, and convey these across the alliance.

1.“Diving into data”	2.“Paving the way”	3.“Gathering the tables”	4.“Dressing actors”	5.“Sowing seeds”	6.“Drinking coffee”
Data-generation, knowledge gathering, research orientation	Legitimizing, project managing, planning	Networking, local knowledge about actors, inviting, mediating/broker-ing	Capacity build, coaching, motivating, empowering, translating	Inspire, challenge,	Relationship creation and maintaining, emotional support, understanding, mapping
Structural change		Relational change		Transformative change	

Table 4 Backbone sayings and corresponding actions (source: authors own work)

Underlying the assumption of diving into data is that a pool of data exists and is available for diving into. In this study the pool was assembled using data from various sources: data the backbone collected from the community, desk research on available knowledge, and data that were analysed from the municipality. As one alliance actors put it: “In Denmark we have so much data available in the municipalities. Piles of it! It is really about us not knowing what to do with it. How and what to use it for.” It is an act of mobilizing resources in the Collective Impact and having access to municipality data that can be beneficial across the actor network. Another alliance actor states that: “The power that lies in the backbone, you can say,

they have the time to dig into some things. We can go deeper than we usually do, because the backbone exists as a kind of 'investigative group'. Here the value is the backbone resources and skills to do so, as well as dedicated staff, hours, and access.

Paving the way

Paving the way was about legitimization in the community and removing administrative burdens, making things easier for the actors, and clearing the path for change to happen.

Legitimization both paved the way for the entire alliance by securing support from the community, local actors, municipal leaders, and politicians, but it also paved the way for experimentation and the testing of projects by bypassing bureaucratic layers that were otherwise believed to hinder such processes. As one actor explained: "It's always easier to get things done in the Eastern city because of MedVind. We don't have to go through the whole administrative hassle. We know we have support, and they can act as managers on the projects." The 'administrative hassle' that the alliance actor is referring to is a representation of the bureaucracy that is one of the systems the MedVind actions intended to systemically change. This experience 'of ease' that actors feel when wishing to test innovations was a systemic change made possible through the legitimizing work of the backbone and through the very existence of the backbone as supporting infrastructure.

Diving and paving for explicit systemic outcomes

Both "diving into data" and "paving the way" were actions by the backbone that enabled structural change. Establishing the backbone as a local, cross-organizational form shifted resource flows towards the broader community. The backbone redirected not only financial resources but also the flow of information and knowledge among alliance actors, changing data-sharing practices. These shifts altered organizational rules, priorities, and guidelines both within and between organizations. Thus, change occurred through participating organizations and their representatives in the collaboration, not directly by the backbone. The generated data shifted actors' focus to challenges highlighted by the data. Changes in practices emerged from pilot projects managed by the backbone, evolving into permanent programs or small-scale practice changes. These backbone actions produced visible value for participants, including guidelines, reports, project descriptions, and small-scale evaluations tracking alliance progress

Relational change through semi-tangible actions

Gathering tables

The object receiving the most attention in the backbone was the *table* and the practice of gathering people around one. The table that the backbone invited actors to sit around was both mental and physical – it was both neutral grounds to meet around, a physical table in a room or in the community, and a shared (mental) space for understanding. The table in the backbone was considered neutral ground by actors, as it was not the municipality and not the foundation. There was an understanding among the actors that the backbone, although representing the two founders, was a place that existed for the participating actors – a door they could knock on or a phone number to call when they encountered challenges in their community that they could not solve alone or when they needed help to find collaborators. Examples of challenges were increase in violence in families, declining average grades at school, or a worn-out playground.

Gathering the table was the practice of inviting actors into the room and opening the door for them. This act required the backbone to have knowledge about the community and the organizations operating in the area, as well as the people living there. They knew who struggled, who shared struggles, and who could be the answer to these struggles. The table is thus a metaphor for network facilitation, which carries practices of setting up meetings and preparing agendas, but also facilitating a place to be vulnerable and open about the shortcomings, failures, and successes that the actors experience. One actor explained how the relationship between the kindergarten and the school, two primary actors in the alliance, had changed:

“Well before, I think the relationship between me [daycare leader] and Peter [school principal] was, well not good. Like, we would think that we ‘made’ good children and then when they entered school, they ‘destroyed’ all that progress. And the school kept saying that these children didn’t have a chance to succeed in school when we didn’t prepare them properly. We just blamed each other when these kids didn’t succeed. Now because of MedVind we have spent a lot of time together and understand each other. In the beginning the communications were facilitated by Birgit [backbone staff] and Per [backbone staff], but now I would simply just pick up the phone and call directly. We have arranged several events together like before-school meeting for parents from the kindergarten.”

This is an example of a relationship change that happened between two actors in the alliance because of them both having gathered around the backbone table.

Systemic change at the relational level can be actors seeking feedback and advice from each other, as illustrated in the above example. This now happens in the alliance without backbone intervention, but it happened due to the convening work the backbone had done in creating these relationships.

Dressing the actors

Dressing actors was about preparing actors for the collaborative work: it was making sure that people were equipped to step into the room, to sit around the previously presented table. “People can be uncomfortable in these meetings. So, we dress them.” The informant explained further how this could be: “That could be before a meeting, making them feel comfortable.” When gathering people around tables, it is important for the backbone employees to be mindful of the inherent power imbalances that exist: “We can pretend that we are all equal but for some [people] it is very intimidating to engage in conversation with a foundation director for example.”.

Many of the actors were public leaders who shared an understanding of the system they were working in, but even then, differences existed across departments and in the hierarchical layers that existed. As one informant explained, people were perhaps not used to working in close collaboration with their superiors in the municipality if they were both from that system. The backbone acted as a mediator between the various logics and cultures present in the alliance. Dressing the actors often involved conversations in which actors were given background information about each other, essentially bridging conversations across organizational divides, and empowering them to be able to participate. This is like what Nichols (2021) finds in her study on enabling evidence-led collaborative systems change efforts, which backbone staff described as ‘handholding’.

Gathering and dressing for semi-explicit systemic outcomes

The second level of semi-explicit relational change is introduced with the words “[s]imply bringing people into relationships can create huge impact” (Kania et al., 2018, p. 7), but this article argues that ‘bringing people into relationships’ is not a simple task: it requires work, and that work was done by the backbone in the form of emotional engagement, support, and time spent together. Bringing people into relationships is very much about the quality of the connections.

It can be observed if networks have grown and if decision-making processes have become more inclusive or if decision-making power has been more equally

distributed. What is less visible, and which includes emotional labour from the backbone, is the quality that this connectedness has and the facilitation of this. Backbone employees can facilitate who gets to speak, who will participate, and make sure that those who do are properly prepared to engage in meaningful conversations on more equal terms.

Many of the partners were prejudiced about each other from years of having perceptions of ‘what the others do’ but had never been engaged with each other. By serving as a mediator, the backbone managed these complex relationships in the alliance. On one of my first days in the field, I was told by the backbone leader that it was important for him and the organization that the backbone could not be ‘personally carried’. He explained it like this:

“The change we make cannot be because of the relationships the actors in the alliance have built with me as a person. I should be able to get hit by a bus or win the euro jackpot tomorrow and leave and be replaced by anyone, and everything would still stand exactly the same way.”

Two years later, he revised that statement, as it gradually became evident just how important the specific personal relationships were, not only between the backbone as an organization and the actors as organizations, but also between the people representing these organizations. The informant later reflected on this and how change at the deeper level occurred: “I can only drive this change forward if I have a relationship with them. If I can cheer them on, celebrate their victories and have a relationship that can handle difficult conversations.” This resonates with the finding by Nichols (2021) linking the efficacy of systemic change efforts with the “likeability and charisma’ of organizational leaders” (Nichols et al., 2021, p. 14)

Transformational change through intangible actions

Sowing seeds

Sowing seeds was about inspiring and challenging people. The backbone did not hold a position in which they had a mandate to decide or dictate. Their leadership space was to gain followship of the shared agenda (DuBow et al., 2018). Sowing seeds was about asking the right questions, often challenging the actors in their status quo perceptions, assumptions, routines, and ways of doing things. As one informant put it, “they are just able to challenge me in a very loving way. I am being pushed a bit out of my municipal frameworks and patterns, both physically and professionally,” emphasizing the care that actors experienced from the backbone and

that actors even perceived the backbone's critical questions as care. Likewise, one backbone informant explained: "I can only challenge them in their assumption when I have a certain relationship with them." Sowing seeds was a conversational approach by which the backbone staff challenged the actors' ways of thinking about, and seeing, the problem.

When they were 'sowing seeds', they were also referring to the slowness of a seed taking root and becoming a plant, how they could not simply impose an idea on the actors or force them to have a change of mind or change their ways, but that it took constant small nudges in a safe relationship. One informant who experienced this sowing of seeds explained it like this:

"Often, my go-to argument has been that a change is not possible within our existing frames of law, that we could not change it. But as it turned out, we actually could do something differently. I have been reminded to constantly revisit my own interpretation and understanding of these frames, helped in seeing that I actually had more room than I first believed."

This reflection followed a major change in the structures of the local job centre, in which a separate place outside the municipality had been set up for youth outside the job market in Østerbyen. Here, the youth were not met with force and consequence but rather a safe space, a mix between a drop-in centre¹³ and a place to meet others and get closer to enrolling in education or getting a job.¹⁴ The informant further reflected on the process by addressing the power that she had to share with the other actors in the alliance: "we need to want to share power. It's hard, because when we have it, we like having it."

Drinking coffee

Drinking coffee was a central continuous action in the backbone and considered by the backbone staff themselves as their most important tool. Whenever asked about their job as Collective Impact backbone, a sentence repeated was: "We drink a lot of coffee." The saying usually harvested the intended laughs in out-of-office

¹³ Translated from the Danish word 'værested': that is, a place to drop in and receive social counselling from volunteers.

¹⁴ <https://www.esbjerg.dk/vindm%C3%B8llen>

settings, but it reveals the value the action was believed to carry and the struggle to put into words what the backbone does. The informants explained how the coffee drinking was an action used to “create a space for opportunity.”

Coffee meetings were generally considered by the informants as informal and “non-dangerous.” Coffee serves as a symbol of the (in)formality of the meeting: “Coffee meetings are not like regular meetings. They are informal, non-committal, and not dangerous. We don’t demand anything from people. We scan for common ground, gain insights, and get to know each other. We as a backbone are also not able to ask for commitments, we don’t have that mandate.”

To many people, drinking coffee as a work task may be considered a great luxury, and the backbone also addressed this: “Well, I guess, in the beginning at least, there was this rumour that ‘Oh people in the backbone, they just hang around and drink coffee’, but that’s only until people, well, drink coffee with us and then [they] understand.” Actors were aware of the negative connotations of drinking coffee, and that this line of thought often goes with a public conversation about pseudo work and bureaucracy, and those “people in the municipality that don’t have their hands in the dirt.” Coffee drinking was deliberately used as a tool, with emphasis on the social and emotional investment in the actors. Coffee drinking provided a space for relationships to be built and, more importantly, to be maintained.

Sowing and drinking towards implicit systemic change outcomes

The deepest level of change, the one with most potential for transformation (Kania 2018) and the one that is the most invisible, is drinking coffee and dressing actors. Here, the taken for granted assumptions the actors had about each other, the possibilities of the system, and imaginative power were challenged through continuous empathetic dialogue with and facilitated by the backbone staff. Mental models, the condition that both holds the system and has the possibility to change it, are about how actors view population in question and how they perceive each other in the system of actors that surrounds these children. One backbone informant spoke of the alliance as a ‘felt’ collaboration:

C: I think the different thing there – because it is a local engagement and not a national one, or a policy one – is that people experience the collaboration, rather than seeing it theoretically on paper. They feel it.

I: How is it felt?

C: So, for example, we hug. In the beginning, it was very strange to me how every meeting, and every encounter in this setting, started with a hug. Like, we were not

used to that here in Esbjerg. Now it feels like the most natural thing, because we are so engaged and care so much about each other.

Discussion: Relational and emotional labour as invisible work towards systemic change

Transformative change, the deepest level of systemic change, is characterized by being intangible and implicit (Cole & Hagen, 2023; Kania et al., 2018), and this article proposes that theoretical understandings of this level of change could be broadened by having it in conversation with ‘invisibility’ as understood in feminist theory and the concept of invisible labour, by acknowledging the invisible actions that contribute to situations where a real iceberg can illustrate what must (also) be given value in partnerships for systemic change.

The ‘inverted iceberg’ model for systemic change proposed by Kania et al. (2018) has different levels according to visibility, this article finds that each level has corresponding actions in the backbone that enable the shift of these conditions towards transformative systemic change (Figure 3). The figure presents the relationship between the backbone sayings as representations of the invisible emotional actions of care and the conditions of systemic change. The division within the triangles speaks to the volume of the act, both in relation to transformative potential and resources spent on these actions.

The ethnographic material reveals how essential parts of the backbone practices are acts of care and relational, invisible emotional labour. As George (2019) posits, emotions are not just peripheral but central to all forms of social activity, including the pursuit of social innovation. Nonetheless, innovative efforts and collaborations, funding, and organizational structures often prioritize visible, tangible outcomes (Malenfant et al., 2019), and this structures the way that work is organized and valued (Nichols et al., 2021). The invisibility of the backbone work is complicated by the demands for quantifiable ‘impact’, as requested from foundations, creating tension between the inherent value of the invisible backbone activities and the prevailing metrics of success.

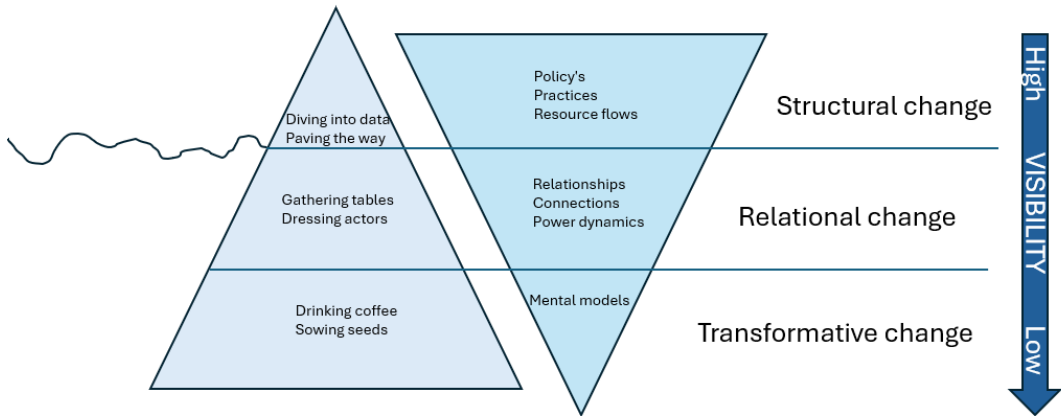


Figure 2 Invisible work towards systemic change (source: authors own work)

Although drinking coffee is acknowledged as an important task for creating trust and establishing relationships, the founders, and funders, still expect results that are tangible, measurable, and visible. Although the production of tangible outputs such as reports and presentations offers a trace of visibility, change at the transformational level is rooted in the invisible levels of relational and emotional engagements. Despite emotional work always having been a part of public administration (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Thomsen, 2020), the value of emotional work is not made visible and is thus not acknowledged among people with more administrative tasks.

The backbone risks being perceived as having a strictly administrative function or of being occupied with work dedicated to population-level outcomes and consequently need to dedicate time and resources to tasks and practices that result in these outcomes. This sidelines the emotional and relational work that underpins successful collaborative efforts. These findings echo those of Malenfant et al. (2019) that backbone employees experience that their emotional and relational work is often hidden or not seen as directly contributing to the organizational mission (p. 42).

Conclusion

This article intended to investigate the backbone actions that occurred in the cross-sector collaboration MedVind in the Eastern City and how they enabled social innovation for systemic change. The findings indicate that the backbone work and actions that go into enabling systemic change are as implicit, intangible, and invisible as systemic change conditions. The article proposes a theoretical understanding of systemic change in CI, as made possible through invisible and emotional labor. Mental models and mindsets are changed not by data alone but through relations and people communicating and presenting these data.

Backbone employees themselves are not vocal about the enabling effect of their actions but speak of ‘gathering tables’ and ‘drinking coffee’ actions in which the emotional work is hidden – in the hugs that are given in these encounters, the time devoted to each other, and the attentive dialogue. In the collaboration, ‘caring for’ was often thought of as care for the children who are the target population of the initiative, and although care for the wellbeing of the children in the community might be the motivation for the participation of many of the actors, it is the care between actors, backbone, and participants that drives change forward. The system is made up of people, and often people representing organizations, institutions, and so on, and this study shows that it is the relationship between actors that has the power to create systemic change, but such relationships must be facilitated, and this facilitation requires actions of emotional and relational character that are often invisible.

With increased attention on systemic change from founders of Collective Impact initiatives and other collaborative initiatives in the face of wicked problems, practical implications of this research are that the facilitation, design, and meta governance of these initiatives should take into consideration the skills and resources available and necessary in the backbone organization and refrain from seeing it as purely administratively based on the visible actions above the surface. Further, Collective Impact practitioners and people in similar cross-sectoral meta-governance functions should reflect on the process of the backbone’s actions alongside its role. Acknowledging and recognizing this work and the value that these actions produce towards the systemic change outcomes that are ultimately believed to change the outcomes for the target population will further the shared agenda

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05.03 Article C: Can Courage Be Co-created? Pursuing Systemic Change in Cross-Sector Collaboration

Karoline Duus Lindegaard

Abstract

While systemic change holds a growing place in both social innovation literature and public discourse on how to create societal change, we know very little about how such a pursued look like empirically. This article contributes by providing an ethnographic exploration on exactly such a systemic change pursuit, with departure in a case organization build on the Collective Impact framework. Through the lens of mindset shifts and its transformative leverage within systemic change theory, it provides accounts of how the systemic change pursued is barriered by narrow ideas about being data-driven and understanding of the target system. Despite these barriers, indicators of systemic change through mindset shifts are identified. Ultimately, the article discusses going from potential to intentional systemic change in cross-sector collaboration.

Introduction

“We must break down municipal silos!” “We will challenge bureaucratic thinking!!” “We must have courage!” These are all articulations of intended ‘systemic changes’ that a Danish ‘Collective Impact’ initiative is pursuing as part of a cross-sector alliance for increasing social mobility among children and youth in a local community.

Creating systemic changes is increasingly becoming a goal for practitioners of social innovation (Clarke et al., 2018; Trujillo, 2018), and it holds an even faster growing place in public discourse and in the grey literature of philanthropic foundations (eg. Køningsfeldt 2024, Seelos, 2020). Despite the resources allocated to the welfare state for the past 50 years, the same complex, societal challenges still prevail. This has spurred public discourse on the failure of the systems that constitute the welfare state, their adequate ability to tackle the increased complexity, and systemic change as a way of addressing these issues.

The attempts at systemic change often occur in cross-sector collaborations between multiple actors as a way of addressing societies’ ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1974), such as poverty, climate change, and homelessness (Grewatsch et al., 2023; Waddock & Kuenkel, 2019). This reflects an understanding that these problems must be addressed at a systemic level where the root causes of the problem appear (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Weaver, 2016). Despite the increased practitioner attention and focus on systemic change, we know very little about how systemic change is pursued, how it is understood by those carrying out the change, what role it plays against other outcomes, and what drivers and barriers exist in relation to obtaining it.

Collective impact is a framework for collaboration that actively holds an intent of systemic change, thereby offering an opportunity to explore how systemic change is understood, pursued, and taking place in practice. It is a data-driven, co-creational (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022) approach for social innovation with the intent of “[...] achieving systems-level changes in communities through coordinated multi-sector collaborations” (Christens & Inzeo, 2015, p. 420) Unlike other approaches to cross-sector collaboration, Collective Impact is defined by long-term alignment around a common agenda that seeks to address root causes of a systemic problem (Christens & Inzeo, 2015; Weaver, 2016). It is a collaboration that is driven by local needs and a wider, transformative vision, to use the words of Bartels (2022), and that therefore seeks both population-level (local) and system-level (transformative) outcomes.

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish Collective Impact initiative, this article investigates systemic change as a desired outcome of a cross-sector collaboration. It does not seek to uncover whether the specific articulations that open this article actually happened; rather, it attempts to answer the research question: *How does systemic change occur, or fail to occur, in a cross-sector alliance?*

This article presents a review of the existing literature on systemic change in cross-sector collaboration, with an emphasis on mindset shifts. This is followed by a methods section describing the ethnographic approach. Findings are presented in two sections systemic change that did not happen, which focuses on the barriers of engaging with systemic change, followed by a chapter on the systemic changes that did happen, which presents two major mindset shifts in the eco-system of the cross-sector alliance.

Understanding systemic change as mindset shifts in cross-sector collaboration

In the words of Bolton (2022, p. 2428) “We live in systems, we work in systems, and yet we try to solve problems within them by taking a siloed or linear approach”. This is also the problem that is implied in the introductory exclamation of wanting to ‘break down municipal silos’, as these silos have become barriers for addressing complex societal problems by the public sector. This may be one reason why systemic change is (re)gaining attention, not only in the public discourse on societal grand challenges, but also among organizational and management scholars whose attention is directed towards tackling wicked problems (Clarke et al., 2018; Grewa-tsch et al., 2023; Trujillo, 2018).

Since these societal grand challenges are “systemic in terms of their reach and impact” (Avelino et al., 2019), a systemic approach to tackling them has been adopted in various fields; health (Khayal, 2019; Nobles et al., 2022), change management (Waddock, 2020; Waddock et al., 2015), service design (Hay & Vink, 2023; Vink et al., 2018), and education (Hofman-Bergholm, 2018; Koral Kordova et al., 2018; Leibnitz et al., 2022).

A systemic approach to change is an understanding of change that requires systemic thinking, that is, perceiving the world as made up of interconnected and related systems. In an ever changing world with increasing complexity, Meadows argues, systems theory and systemic thinking can help identify root causes and see

new opportunities (D. H. Meadows, 2008). According to Meadows, a system is “[...] an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something” (D. H. Meadows, 2008, p. 11). In her work, she lists 12 leverage points, in increasing order of effectiveness, for intervening in a system as a means of creating systemic change, such as for example ‘regulating negative feedback loops’, ‘the rules of the system (incentives, punishments, constraints)’ and ‘information flows’. The last leverage point on her list is “The mindset or paradigm out of which the system - its goals, power structure, rules, its culture - arises” (D. Meadows, 1997).

While few studies use the original leverage points approach to systemic change (for examples of its use see e.g. Bolton, 2022 and Davelaar, 2021), more researchers have applied the modelling of ideas from the original essay into a more recognizable visualization (Nobles et al., 2022) in which the leverage points are sorted into levels of change. In the early works of Senge (1990), the levels are divided into events, patterns, system structures, and mental models, while his later work, conducted in collaboration with authors of the Collective Impact framework, divides it into only three levels of change: structural, relational, and transformative (Kania et al., 2018).

Systemic thinking is in opposition to reductionist thinking and to the idea that causal models can predict outcomes of socially complex problems (Grewatsch et al., 2023). Systemic thinking emphasizes that a system is more than its parts, and that elements of a system should always be seen in the context of that system (D. H. Meadows, 2008; Shaked & Schechter, 2017), whereas reductionist thinking studies elements in isolation, often avoiding contextual factors (Flood, 2010).

In the management literature, systemic change, or systems change, is often used interchangeably with, or at least treated as closely related to, concepts of ‘Systemic Social Innovation’ (Moore et al., 2015), ‘Systemic innovation’ (Avelino et al., 2019; Zivkovic, 2018), ‘Transformational System Change’ (Waddock, 2020), ‘Systemic impact’ (Moore et al., 2015). All of these are related to change, transformation, impact, and innovation from a systemic approach, that is, relying on the ideas of connectivity and relations among parts in complex systems.

System change is thus closely linked to social innovation and cross-sector collaboration, and it shares the assumption that challenges must be addressed through collaboration between actors in the system: the private and public sectors, and the civil society. In that way, cross-sector collaboration is presented as a new paradigm for managing complex problems through creating systemic changes (Trujillo, 2018), and Collective impact has been established as a structured methodological

approach to help drive collaborations to address social problems through systemic changes (Panjwani et al., 2023)

Mindset shift and mental models as transformative potential within systems

Systemic change, with all its adjacent and interchangeably used concepts across the literature, includes the understanding that the ultimate potential for change, and thus a desired target for impact, lies in people's values, beliefs, mindsets, and mental models: in *culture*. Mental models are the internal representations that individuals use to make sense of the world (Garrrity, 2018; Jones et al., 2011). They include beliefs, assumptions, and generalizations, and they shape not only how we interpret events but also how we react to them. In systemic change, challenging and expanding these models can enable stakeholders to conceive new solutions or approaches that were previously unconsidered (Senge, 2020). Denzau and North (1994) argue that shared mental models among actors form the basis of institutional arrangements. Consequently, altering these deeply ingrained models is necessary for modifying institutional structures.

The deep-seated beliefs, norms, attitudes, and values, collectively referred to as the mindset, of individuals and organizations are essential (Nobles et al., 2022). They not only reflect but also define the goals of the system, maintaining its continuity and functionality. However, systemic change initiatives aim to shift these very foundational elements, recognizing that without such changes at the foundational level, transformation will remain superficial.

The concept of co-creation, which emphasizes relational practices and embraces uncertainty, is believed to constitute one of the mindset shifts that have a possibility to transform the public sector as a welfare system (Forsell Simonsson et al., 2024). The shift from traditional, hierarchical models of public management to co-creation represents not just a methodological change but a profound shift in the underlying mindset and culture within public administration and institutions.

The rise of co-creation has gained notable momentum in the Nordic countries, which marks a paradigmatic departure from new public management towards more collaborative and inclusive forms of governance (Ansell & Torfing, 2021; Bryson et al., 2017). The alignment of co-creation with social innovation lies in its ability to foster novel solutions through collaborative efforts that directly involve stakeholders in the processes of public service and policy development. Thus, co-creation

serves both as a method and as a manifestation of a new mindset, thereby facilitating a broader engagement with innovation within public systems.

One method for actively seeking to create mindset shifts, or changing mental models, is to shift the narratives that people use to make sense of their world. Narratives build on “core units of culture like words phrases ideas images symbols” (Waddock, 2020, p. 194). Changing the dominant narratives can provide leverage for systemic change through the alteration of mindsets and may thereby create systemic change.

In sum, the transformation within organizations and systems at large relies on shifting the mental models and mindsets of the actors inhabiting them. As systemic change encompasses more than procedural adjustments, it requires changes in the collective consciousness of a system’s members.

Since systemic change in cross-sector collaborations relies on mindset shifts among participants to achieve system-level transformation, it is essential to understand how these shifts materialize—or fail to materialize—in practice. To explore this, this study employs an ethnographic approach to observe and analyze the complexities of systemic transformation within a Danish Collective Impact initiative. The methods section below outlines the ethnographic process undertaken to capture both the successes and the barriers encountered in striving for systemic change.

Methods

Research design

To understand how systemic change exists and takes place in practice, an in-depth organizational ethnographic study was conducted in a Danish cross-sector alliance based on the Collective Impact framework, which specifically involves working towards systemic change. Systemic change can be slow, incremental, and even invisible (D. H. Meadows, 2008), but the ethnographic approach allowed the research to follow the alliance over time and thus to see things evolve. The approach was particularly suitable for gaining insight into processes that could often not be directly observed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995).

As is traditional in ethnographic research, this study combines the methods of data collection through participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, and documentary material (Fetterman, 1998). Throughout the study, I perceived the alliance as an actor, or as an organization, and the pronoun ‘they’ in the results section does not necessarily refer to the actors as individuals or to the organizations

that they represent, but to the alliance as an organization. Ethnography is grounded in the belief that the base of knowledge is interpersonal relations (McGranahan, 2018), which necessitates the formation of relationships with interlocutors or informants, and therefore I positioned myself as researcher within an already existing ‘web of relations’ (Werth & Ballesterio, 2017).

Context – MedVind I Østerbyen as case

The Collective Impact initiative MedVind I Østerbyen started in 2017 with a partnership between a philanthropic foundation and Esbjerg Municipality, the former with a changed grant strategy and wanting to engage in a more long-term, catalytic and trust-based way, and the latter being an urban community facing continuous socio-economic challenges and a group of children and adolescents that were falling behind the rest of the communities in the municipality. After a process of inviting stakeholders from the community to take part in a mapping of the problem, facilitated by external consultancy, it was decided that the best way forward was the Collective Impact framework and basing the cross-sectoral collaboration on the five core elements of shared agenda, continuous communication, mutually dependent activities, shared measurement, and backbone secretariat support.

Using the Collective Impact framework as a point of departure, this initiative thus brought together actors with a social purpose within the geographical boundaries of the community ‘The Eastern City’. This meant that the school, kindergartens, vocational training schools, local departments of national NGO’s, the job centre, museums, and local businesses were among the actors that participated in the initiative. This happened through a commitment to the shared agenda that “all children and adolescents find their way through education and into the job market by 2030”, participation in pilot projects, and more formal participation in an organizational structure for the initiative. The stakeholders were organized around four groups: 1) a partner group serving as the formal board of the alliance in which the two founding and funding partners – the foundation and the municipality – were represented; 2) a steering committee consisting of various representatives from the actors listed above; 3) all actors in Østerbyen who wanted to participate in the initiative – initially the list of actors dedicating themselves to the work counted fifty local organizations, institutions and associations; and lastly 4) a backbone office – a staffed secretariat – that handled the day-to-day tasks of the initiative and worked to bring the initiative forward.

As an organization, the backbone secretariat was placed under the Municipality jurisdiction and was thus a public sector organization, but with no formal service

delivery expectations. The initiative was established in 2017 with an initial timeframe of 12 years, which was a long-term commitment unusual for both parties. This places the ethnographic fieldwork (between February 2020 and September 2023) in the middle of the lifespan of the initiative. During the lifespan of MedVind, its actors, partners and staff have used various terms to refer to their common endeavor: A movement, an initiative, a network, and an alliance. The preferred current word (in 2024) is alliance, which is also the term that is used throughout this article.

Data-generation and analysis

Systemic change was ‘followed’ as a concept and observed in the alliance through various data-generating opportunities: In strategy documents; in the initiative’s Theories of Change, including the workshops and meetings to develop them; in evaluations and meetings to plan, discuss and evaluate the strategy; in backbone meetings; in steering committee meetings; in decision-making processes regarding which activities to pay attention to; and in the everyday life and routines of the backbone secretariat. Throughout the fieldwork, I took fieldnotes, both electronic and hand-written, with observations and reflections on the presence and absence of the concept of systemic change as well as emerging themes related to the concept.

In ethnography, the lines between data collection and analysis are blurred: The process of analysis is ongoing and embedded in the data collection, literature review and theoretical considerations (Atkinson, 2014; Ballesterio & Winthereik, 2021). The analysis is an iterative process that involves going back and forth between the field and the data set. It develops throughout the corpus of field notes, and it includes ‘hunches’ (Atkinson, 2014), ‘dwelling on data’ (Varpio et al., 2017), and recognizing themes in the material. One initial aim of the study was to identify barriers for obtaining systemic change. However, through a recognition of preliminary patterns in the data collection process, it became clear that systemic change was very much absent as an intentional pursuit, apart from the articulations by stakeholders presented in the introduction. As a consequence of this preliminary finding, I changed my focus to investigating why systemic change was not pursued, that is, looking for the barriers preventing the strategic and practical engagement in systemic change.

At first, it seemed that the next step would be to explore drivers. Since the overall aim had shifted from barriers to systemic change to barriers preventing the pursuit of systemic change, correspondingly, this step would be to explore the drivers of pursuing systemic change. However, the drivers for pursuing systemic change in the alliance were already made explicit in the mobilizing argument for creating the

entire alliance: that the current ways of the system had failed. Instead, I became interested in understanding if any systemic changes had happened despite the absence of intent. These two themes – barriers for pursuing systemic change and systemic change occurring despite the absence of intent – focused and guided the subsequent data collection and the ongoing analysis. An exploration of the literature revealed the concept of mindset as the deepest level of systemic change, holding transformative potential while being invisible, which resonated with the focus of interest of the researcher. This concept therefore provided grounding for the analysis and helped focus attention. Although narratives and stories were presented in the literature as a means of changing mindsets and leveraging systemic change, I instead used them as a strategy for data collection and analysis, as a lens through which I would be able to see, and follow, shared mindsets over time. The strategies for analysis of constructing and deconstructing categories of barriers while following narratives and emergent themes of changed mindsets to explore the terms on which systemic change occurred and did not occur resulted in the following findings: Two main barriers for the pursuit of systemic change were identified, and two mindset shifts were found to occur despite these barriers. The final mindset shift, which has to do with courage, has the potential to serve as an enabler for the future pursuit of systemic change.

Findings

Systemic change that didn't happen

Voiced but not written

Articulations of breaking down municipal silos and challenging bureaucratic thinking were the most frequently voiced pursuits of systemic change among actors in the alliance. They were brought forward in interviews as the most significant experienced potential of the alliance and framework.

“Working across sectors like this, you don’t see that many places, it is extremely difficult to get the municipality to even work collaboratively internally. MedVind is, like, poking the municipality that is a very top managed, hierarchical, silo-divided organization. So, I very much hope that MedVind can show the way on how to make partnerships and things cross-sectoral, lift things in a different way”

But although pursuits of systemic change are brought forward in the interviews, they are never articulated as such. The alliance actors themselves never use the words ‘systemic change’ or any of its alternative formats (systems change, transformational change, systemic innovation). The articulations never materialize in the written material belonging to the organization, such as the strategy, evaluations,

decided-upon progression goals, or Theories of Change, a strategic tool used as a set of ideas about how change processes happen and can be managed. (Waddell et al., 2015)

This is related to the general finding that the actors of the alliance did not consider themselves to be engaged in systemic change. when I raised the question of the non-existing systemic change perspective in the evaluation plan, one actor said: “but we don’t do systemic change. Like, we don’t look at national level, we don’t lobby for policy changes like other Collective Impacts”. This statement represents a general finding in the ethnographic material: Systemic change was understood as *policy changes*. In system change theory, this is change at the structural level (Kania et al., 2018), or events-level (Senge, 1990). Across the actors in the alliance, system changes were understood primarily as policy change, primarily achieved through advocacy and lobbying, and thus beyond the scope of the alliance, since they were locally engaged, whereas systemic change, in the form of policy changes, occurred at national level.

‘Systemic change’ became the same as ‘changing *the system*’¹⁵. Instead of constituting a certain approach to and understanding of change grounded in systemic thinking, it became a reference to what needed to change: the system, understood as the public sector. In addition to being *somewhere* else, the system was also understood as being *someone* else. Although many of the participating actors represented public sector organizations and various municipal institutions, responsibility for ‘the system’ was always at the state level when ‘the system’ was mentioned in conversation or in meetings.

Because of this understanding of what systemic change was in the alliance, the systemic changes of breaking down silos and challenging bureaucratic thinking were understood as a byproduct that would happen if the pilot projects proved positive and could become subject to spreading and scaling. Although the discussion of system level outcomes vs. population level outcomes can be perceived as a chicken-or-the-egg type of discussion, that is, they are mutually influenced, in the organization they were perceived as something that would come *after* population-level changes. This led the alliance to engage in activities that exclusively targeted population-level outcomes.

¹⁵ In Danish, the phrasing was “systemisk forandring”

In terms of the written documents, systemic change did appear in the external evaluation of the alliance. Here, mindset change was mentioned but was described as a change wanted in citizens' perception of the local school. The pursuits of systemic change were targeted at citizens and not at the actors in the alliance, which further underlines the finding that the actors did not perceive themselves as representatives, or actors, of the system and thereby as targets for change.

The articulations regarding system changes became mobilizing arguments rather than explicit missions or intended outcomes of the alliance. The transformative vision thus faded in the focus on the local and structural levels as the alliance failed in creating an understanding among each other of the relation between these levels of change and did not develop a common language and tools that enabled the pursuit.

Data-drivenness as barrier

Collective Impact is framed as a data-driven form of collaboration (Sørensen & Torfing, 2022) which includes continuous monitoring of progress and shared measurement as key elements of the framework (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Weaver, 2016). While data can be considered a valuable resource for fostering collaboration across different organizational units (Winthereik, 2023), ethnographic evidence suggests that in the alliance the emphasis on being data-driven aligned with a mindset focused on measurable outcomes and thus drew attention away from un-measurable systemic outcomes.

Within the backbone organization of the alliance, "progression goals" were prominently displayed on a wall. These goals, decided by the steering committee and partner group and grounded in a theory of change, included specific, measurable outcomes, such as the number of children passing math, participation in after-school activities, employment in after-school jobs, reductions in loneliness and school absences, and success in language evaluations. Although these goals reflected a commitment to measurable progress, they also reinforced a narrow focus on quantifiable outcomes.

Statements of being 'evidence-based' and engaging in 'best practice' were often articulated in steering committee meetings, and although detached from their origin in medicine (Driever, 2002), these concepts both refer to a common understanding of 'we must do what we know will work', that is, decision-making within a framework driven by a belief that 'evidence is the best argument' which led to actions that prioritized measurable outcomes.

Such comments highlight a persistent reductionist thinking within the alliance, even as it sought to adopt a more systemic approach. The emphasis on being data-driven and evidence-led and on adhering to best practices often led to a focus on actions that produced tangible, measurable results rather than on addressing deeper, systemic issues that were harder to quantify.

While data have been seen as a powerful tool for mobilizing collaboration and fostering organizational reflection, innovation, and optimization (Government, 2022), in this Danish Collective Impact it also revealed a fundamental paradox within the Collective Impact framework. The approach aims to drive systemic change, yet relies heavily on metrics that favor measurable, short-term gains over long-term, systemic transformation. The reliance on quantifiable data is rooted in a management paradigm that dominates the public sector and favors bureaucratic thinking. In the words of Wilsom et al. (2024) in relation to public management, it is a case of “NPG problems met with NPM solutions” – a bureaucratic context favoring performance indicators and what one actor referred to as ‘measurement tyranny’. The alliance was thus caught in a challenging position: it aimed to enact systemic change while using metrics of success defined by the very system it sought to transform. This created conflicting objectives in which the drive for measurable outcomes often overshadowed the pursuit of more profound, less visible, and harder-to-measure systemic changes.

Despite these barriers and the apparent lack of focus on systemic change, stemming from both a constrained understanding of systemic processes and a preference for measurable results, the collaboration did achieve some systemic changes. These will be presented in the following.

System change that did happen

Changing whose mindset?

At the beginning of the fieldwork, a story about the target population of the initiative was presented. It was a story about people in the community, the families of the children and adolescents around whom the initiative revolves, who were described as celebrating when their children turned 18 because it meant that they would receive their first government support (kontanthjælp). This occasion was said to be celebrated as a rite of passage, and the now-qualified recipient of government subsidies would blow out candles on a layered cake while being cheered on by other family members, like a birthday celebration. This was a dominant narrative in the alliance, repeated in various settings by various actors. It was always told with

indignation in a tone of voice of “can you believe that’s how they live?” The narrative was used to explain the necessity of the initiative among stakeholders and the shared agenda that it was mobilized around – *that all children and adolescents in the Eastern City find their way through education and into employment*. The narrative was used to paint a picture of the community and target population of the initiative, of their ambitions for their lives, their perceived unwillingness to engage in either work or education, and of how socio-economic status reproduced itself in families.

I never discovered the origin of the story; nobody knew who originally told it, if it was representative, or even made up. But in the end, that did not matter. What mattered was that this was a dominating narrative about the community, told by the actors that created the alliance with the purpose of changing the lives for these people.

In addition to painting a picture of the target population of the alliance, the narrative also revealed a lot about the underlying perception, mindset, and dominating mental models of the initiating partners. “Well, it’s a lot about being a part of changing the mindset and ways of thinking of these children and their families. That there are other ways to live your life than being on government subsidies, that you can have ambitions about education, no matter what type, you just have to get started on some sort of education. It is, well, it is in the heads of people, it is pretty important to change their mindsets and mentality”

The repeated story of cake celebrations and the quote about ‘being a part of changing the mindset of people’ were core narratives in the alliance (Waddock, 2020). The intended transformative systemic change, in the form of mental models, for the success of the alliance was that people in the community would think differently about their lives.

But then the narrative disappeared. After 18 months away from the field, I re-entered the organization as an industrial researcher. The poster on the wall with the shared agenda was still very much present in the backbone office, the focus on *job and education* still at the center; but at the meetings, both formal and informal, the narrative of the cake celebrations in the community was no longer repeated. I could no longer trace it in the ethnographic material. Something had happened between April 2021 and August 2022 that had resulted in the disappearance of this narrative. Now, the narrative about the children and adolescents was that they had been let down by *the system*, according to specific stories that came directly from the target population themselves. It was stories both of how ‘the system’ had let these children down, and also of how people representing that system who were in direct

contact with the children – such as pedagogues and teachers – felt constrained by the wider system.

At this point, several years into the collaboration, the actors had shared details with each other and had given each other insight into various aspects and elements of the system, and somewhere in all these conversations, the narrative, and the mind-sets, had shifted. It was no longer the families that were perceived to be in need of a ‘mindset shift’. Now, the focus was on the public sector as a service provider and those people carrying out public services. This shift in perspective enhanced the alliance's emphasis on systemic change. While the children remained the ultimate beneficiaries, the approach now recognized that to improve their lives it was necessary to transform the entire ecosystem surrounding them—in effect, changing the system itself.

Curious about when and why the story had disappeared in the alliance, I asked a key informant.

R “How present do you think the shared agenda is in your current work? Do you remember that time when we spoke of celebrating ‘kontanthjælp’?”

B “I mean, it’s still our agenda, but I believe we are just much more focused on, just like, that everybody deserves a good life. Wellbeing. And what do you mean celebrating?”

R “The story, about how the families celebrated the first kontanthjælp with cake?”

B “I don’t know what you mean”

R “Sure you do. That story, of families waiting and celebrating the day their kid turns 18 and get kontanthjælp”

B “Did we say that?”

R “yes. It was repeated all the time?”

B “I’m sure that’s in your pink notebook somewhere, but I honestly don’t remember!”

This disappearance of the narrative, not just as a dominating narrative, but as existing at all, proved to be the case in general when the actors were asked. Nobody remembered it, it had vanished, which underlines the argument that systemic change is invisible. The reflexivity, memory, and processes of capturing these changes were non-existing in the alliance. The change in narrative did not happen as a result of deliberate design nor of an intentional targeting of leverage points to alter the narrative (Waddock, 2020). Moreover, the changes did not emerge as a planned communicative strategy to present an alternative narrative and thereby change it. Ah-moments, tipping points (Grewatsch et al., 2023), may have happened in the

individual actors at some undefinable point that they themselves were, or were not, aware of, but for the organization, the change happened silently and invisibly.

The change in world views that the founders of the alliance had intended to bring about, namely a change in mindsets of the target population towards becoming self-sufficient, had faded away, and instead the minds that had been changed were those of the founders.

The narrative constitutes a representation of a collective mental model of the partners, founders and actors, and ultimately of the alliance, and therefore the change of narrative reveals that systemic change at the deepest level had happened: transformative change through change in mindsets. The actors themselves were, however, not aware of, and had not noticed, this change. Nobody could recall an aha-moment or a specific tipping point (Grewatsch et al., 2023). It had happened slowly over time; time spent in close relation and conversation with the community, with adolescents, with teachers, pedagogues, civil society representatives, volunteers, and other foundations.

Co-created courage

Having courage was continuously mentioned in the alliance as a desired state-of-mind that was actively worked towards. And although hope is, famously, not a strategy, courage became one in the alliance, represented through a mindset shift of courage that fostered experimentation and engaging with uncertainty. Courage became embedded in the collaborative culture of the initiative through an image of courage as the opposite of 'doing the same'. The alliance actors knew that they wanted to move away from doing things 'like they used to', and they wanted to do something new, innovative, creative, with the realization that the current and past practices had failed in delivering the desired results. But at the same time, as presented in the previous section on data-drivenness, they wanted to do what they knew would produce the intended results. When engaging in decision-making processes regarding how to move forward if an issue was brought up in the alliance, the word courage was used among actors of the alliance to encourage actors to experiment and to dare make mistakes.

It was not a strategic decision or a management style (Bason, 2010; Heifetz et al., 2004), but rather something that happened among the actors as words of encouragement, enabled by the alliance set-up that highly favored and legitimized experimentation. Actors did not experience a changing of mindset as an individual experience but rather as a collaborative process.

Courage was never deliberately implemented or imposed; it was co-created among the actors in the alliance as a mindset that became shared among them. Members of the alliance continually encouraged one another to step outside of their comfort zones, gently pushing each other to challenge their status-quo thinking in encounters that they had. In this way, courage became embedded within the collaborative culture, not as an individual trait but as a collective mindset of the alliance that advanced systemic change and was also itself a result of systemic change.

Concluding discussion: From potential to intentional systemic change

This article set out to investigate how systemic change occurs and does not occur through ethnographic fieldwork of a Danish Collective Impact alliance that was built on a framework that actively holds systemic change as intended outcome. It finds fixpoints that point to both barriers and possibilities. Even before the potential barriers that prevent the changing of systems, barriers exist that prevent even engaging in and pursuing systemic changes. The first barrier is the lack of understanding and language for speaking of systemic problems and changes, and a lack of strategic and process tools from an organizational perspective. Systemic change is understood as something else than what they are doing (policy), taking place somewhere else (national level), and by someone else (politicians, lobbyist etc). The second barrier is an understanding of being data-driven, which is translated into a narrow pursuit of quantifiable, measurable outcomes.

Despite these barriers, systemic changes did happen as outcomes of the collaboration, although they were largely invisible to the organization itself: A shift in mindset towards courage, co-created among the actors in the alliance, a shift regarding whose minds were the targets for change, and a shift in perception of the community and target population.

Together, these findings underline the need to develop new ways of capturing value-creation in cross-sectoral collaborations. Moving systemic change from potential to intentional outcome requires capacity building by practitioners of cross-sector collaboration for systemic thinking, development of a system change vocabulary, as well as challenging of existing understandings of being data-driven. In addition to sharing an agenda, actors of the alliance must be agents of change, intentionally working for systemic change. This requires that the changes are explicit, for example in the statement of missions, and that they are tracked, monitored or mapped

alongside population level outcomes. By actively using the initial articulations of systemic change as missions for change, they would hold place in the organization.

Although the study finds evidence of a culture of courage among the actors, the bravery of experimentation has, as of now, only included *activities* in the alliance, but should also be extended to cover evaluation practices, processes, and the organizational setup. The classical hierarchical organizational structure with a partner group and a steering committee, along with the use of classic evaluation practices, theories of change, progression goals, and milestone plans, are not approached with similar amounts of the co-created courage.

Questions then emerge about which mindsets are necessary, desirable, and possible to change, and should be pursued, and who should be making the decision about this. The first steps for the alliance could be to employ systemic thinking and to use concepts of systems mapping to better see, understand, and speak of the system they are operating within. This would be a step in the direction of, in collaboration, identifying mindsets through dominating narratives that are barriers for the change they wish to pursue.

Thus, this study enriches the theoretical discussions on systemic change by framing courage as an essential precursor to systemic thinking, offering both a conceptual expansion of mindset shifts in transformation and a practical implication for building the internal capacity required for systemic change. It highlights the need for practitioners to explicitly cultivate a culture of courage - embedded in mission statements and operational practices - to truly achieve systemic transformation. Courage underpins the ability to engage with the discomfort of challenging existing norms, crossing bureaucratic silos, and adopting systemic perspectives instead of reductionist ones.

Systemic change is largely invisible and implicit as results and outcomes, hard to grasp, speak about, and think about. This study has made an attempt to maintain focus on the concept and intent that has silently slipped into the background in the alliance. Although it offers valuable insight into how systemic change both happens and does not happen within a Danish Collective Impact alliance, the study has limitations in terms of generalizability. The findings are context-specific, reflecting the experiences of one initiative and the particular dynamics within one localized setting. However, the contributions of this study extend beyond its specific context by highlighting critical barriers, such as the lack of a shared vocabulary of systemic change and limited strategic tools for engaging with systemic-level issues. These findings have significant implications for practitioners, as they suggest that advancing systemic change requires intentional capacity building for systemic thinking, the

development of new evaluative frameworks, and an expansion of courage beyond operational activities to encompass evaluation and organizational structures. By doing so, practitioners may better understand, articulate, and intentionally drive systemic change.

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- PART THREE -

06 Discussion and Conclusion: The Potentials of Collective Impact

This dissertation has examined the following research question: “what is the potential of Collective Impact in the context of the Danish welfare state?” It has explored the ways in which this framework has been implemented and adapted in relation to local government, the intention of systemic change and the role of the backbone in this change, on the basis of long-term ethnographic fieldwork. While I have attempted to explore and respond to this issue throughout the chapters included in this dissertation, in this discussion and conclusion, I provide a set of overall reflections on the main contributions from the articles, three propositions for further engagement with systemic change, along with limitations of the dissertations and future research trajectories.

06.01 Main contributions

Article A reveals that in the welfare state context, the Collective Impact framework offers a means for municipalities to scaffold and provide permanent infrastructure for local engagement in social innovation. In the case of MedVind, the municipality plays a critical role by dedicating resources, ensuring top-leader involvement, and access to public data, while philanthropic foundations contribute funds and structural legitimacy. However, the study highlights the need to balance public sector dominance with shared responsibility among all participants, as framing the shared agenda within public sector organizations risks creating imbalances and limiting collaboration. MedVind demonstrates how Collective Impact can adapt to public sector contexts by functioning as a semi-independent platform anchored in municipal structures. Theoretically, MedVind contributes to the social innovation literature by showing how Collective Impact frameworks can evolve into formalized structures in public sector settings, extending their applicability while emphasising the need for equitable collaboration and the protection of community elements.

Article B reveals that systemic change in cross-sector collaborations such as MedVind in Østerbyen is driven by subtle actions that are often invisible as well as by emotional labour performed by backbone staff. These backbone actions are not merely administrative but rather involve relational and emotional labour, such as creating spaces for dialogue, fostering trust, and establishing supportive connections among participants. Rather than focusing solely on the data, systemic change in this context is driven by meaningful human interactions - which were described by backbone staff as “gathering tables” and “drinking coffee” moments - that promote shifts in mindsets and mental models. This study reveals that caring relationships among actors are central to progress in the regard to systemic change; while the initiative aims to support children, only the mutual care and support among collaborating actors can sustain the process of change. These findings suggest that systemic facilitators of change should not only focus on visible actions but also prioritize the skills and resources that are needed to support these less visible, relational work. For practitioners of Collective Impact and individuals who play similar roles, recognizing and valuing these relational actions are crucial to efforts to improve systemic change.

Article C reveals that systemic change in the context of a Danish Collective Impact alliance faces both structural and conceptual barriers that can hinder the pursuit of transformation. Primary obstacles in this context include the absence of a shared language and strategic tools that can be used to address systemic issues alongside a narrow, quantitative approach to the notion of becoming ‘data-driven’ that can restrict the organization’s understanding of systemic impact. However, the alliance did foster shifts in mindset, notably a sense of collective courage, that allowed the focus and impact of the organization’s work to be rethought. These findings suggest that promoting systemic change requires intentional capacity building, including through the development of a common vocabulary for systemic issues, the integration of systemic goals directly into mission statements, and the establishment of a culture of courage throughout the organization’s practices and evaluation processes. Moreover, it is emphasized how even when change in mindsets happen, it can remain largely invisible to the actors themselves. Although these insights are specific to this Danish context, they have broader implications, particularly by emphasizing the fact that a successful systemic strategy for change must be explicitly framed and sustained.

Together these findings respond to the overall research question of potentials of Collective Impact as social innovation framework in the public sector, and contributes to the scholarly conversation in three key ways: by 1) Empirically illustrating how Collective Impact can serve as a framework for local scaffolding of social innovation and collaborative capacity, thus demonstrating it as a viable framework for public sector funded social innovation, furthering our understanding of how the public sector can engage in, lead, and enable social innovation, (2) by providing empirical evidence of systemic change as practically engaged in by social innovators, particularly in the context of welfare state dynamics. Demonstrating that systemic change is not only a theoretical aspiration but can be practical reality when supported by frameworks such as Collective Impact, although still existing at invisible level, (3) by examining the barriers and enablers of transformative mindset shifts in public sector collaborations. These contributions bridge the gap between theoretical models of social innovation and their practical applications in governance contexts, offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners. Based on the insights, in the following section I will present three propositions for the further pursuit of systemic change through Collective Impact

06.02 Propositions for further engagement with systemic change

Potentials are oriented towards the future; accordingly, in this section, I propose three possibly ways to further the pursuit of systemic change through Collective Impact framework to realize its potential to promote innovations in infrastructure, governance, relationship, mindsets and society: the reintegration of systemic thinking, the inclusion of the notion of cold hands and warm facts, and an embrace of slowness alongside courage.

06.02.01 The Reintegration of Systematic Thinking

Walking, talking... and thinking. Through a shift in the capitulation of letters, i.e., the shift from collective impact to Collective Impact, this notion also moved from a mere reference to the intention of impacting something collectively to its establishment as a framework, model or method that can be applied and implemented (as explored in Article A). In this process, the framework becomes divorced from the

systemic thinking that represents its theoretical foundation and departs from a focus on understanding the intended change. Instead, in the Danish case, the notion of systemic change has been used interchangeably with that of changing the system instead of as a specific way of considering the composition of the world or the ways in which changes occur (as argued in Article C with respect to systemic changes that did not happen).

First, the notion of 'changing the system' refers to the system that constitutes the welfare state and the corresponding process of service delivery; the latter is also a theoretical field that requires an approach that is rooted in systemic thinking and that perceives the world as composed of everything in the context of systems of relationships that are embedded in other systems. This study revealed that, in the discourse (including both public discourse and internal discourse within MedVind), these two factors are perceived as interchangeable. The Collective Impact framework has been divorced from the systemic thinking from which it originated through the work of Senge based on the inspiration of Meadows. These circumstances have led to the emergence of a pragmatic, implementable model.

If we are to take the notion of 'systemic change' seriously as a pursuit, an additional barrier is found in the term 'systemic outcomes' to refer to this issue. This terminology is flawed, as it contains a paradox pertaining to outcome-based performance management and performance management in general. Outcome measurement does not consider the corresponding impacts on people's lives (Lowe, 2013). Thus, if Collective Impact is intended to have collective impact on something, and if it is based on a belief in a systemic holistic worldview, planetary boundaries and sustainability, then the idea of phrasing this concept as 'systemic outcomes' is in itself a reproduction of the system that is supposed to be changing. This gain underlines the finding of the lack of vocabulary of systemic change.

While Salignac et al. (2018) argued that Collective Impact should be viewed as more of a method than a methodology with an underlying philosophy, on the basis of the findings reported in Articles B and C, I believe that for Collective Impact to realize its potential for systemic change, systemic thinking should be reintegrated into the model, thus transforming it into a methodology. This transformation could support thinking from a line of thought based on the claim that 'to optimize the whole, we must optimize the parts', i.e., a more reductionist and solutionist form of thinking, to an emphasis on the claim that 'to optimize the whole, we must improve the relationships among the parts'.

In 'A Note from the Author' in "Thinking in Systems" (2008), Meadows states that she does not "deal with the most abstract theories and am interested in analysis only when I can see how it helps solve real problems". However, as indicated in Article B, when actors are unfamiliar with systemic thinking and change, which we might expect is the case for most social innovators, this approach tends to be viewed as a rather abstract theory. Accordingly, further engagement with systemic change in the context of social innovation, as public discourse and interest are making increasingly likely, must be followed by a shift in mindset towards systemic thinking and the development of tools for thinking in systems.

In the fields of health and education, systemic change has been adapted as an approach by both practitioners and academics. As mentioned, one reason for the presence of 'systemic change' in each of these fields—i.e., sustainability, education and health—is that these fields are already perceived as systems. The notion of a system is embedded in language and thus in the corresponding worldview. Consider the education system the health system, or the idea of nature in terms of ecosystems. Because the systemic perspective already exists in this context, it seems to be easier to apply this notion to efforts to address change. When we instead attempt to achieve systemic change on the basis of a mission of wellbeing, we reach impasses before we start; namely, what is the system of wellbeing?

Meadows noted that systemic thinking should focus on viewing the world as interconnected, in which context the relationships among actors are fundamental. In this way, returning to systemic thinking and its holistic view of interdependencies can help reframe Collective Impact as not merely a framework and method but also as a call to rethink and challenge the fragmented, optimization-driven systems that we have built. Furthermore, the integration of systemic thinking could steer organizations away from fixed milestone plans and theories of change towards a more relational and dynamic understanding of change, in which context systemic change becomes more than a large-scale endeavour; namely, it also becomes a way of thinking and learning, even within local systems such as Østerbyen.

In this context, it becomes essential to view systems, rather than merely organizations or projects, as the basis for social interventions (Lowe, 2013). By focusing on relationships, we can understand systemic change not as the sum of isolated actions but rather as the product of deeply interconnected efforts.

06.02.02 Acknowledging the Value of Cold Hands and Warm Facts

In public discourse, the terms “warm hands” and “cold facts” have frequently been identified as important ingredients in the ability of the welfare state to provide public services. I propose instead that the notion ‘cold hands’ and ‘warm facts’. These are essential with respect to the ability of Collective Impact to reach its full potential as a local governance structure with a focus on social innovation, as well as its viability as an approach to future engagement with locally embedded societal challenges.

In Article B, I argue that the ‘cold hands’ associated with administrative and facilitative roles are increasingly engaging in labour processes and activities that are typically associated with the ‘warm hands’ that pertain to care - namely emotional, often invisible types of labour. These tasks, which have traditionally been linked to direct interaction between the state and citizens, have been explored primarily in research on the health sector, in which context the citizen has been identified as a patient. More recently, this approach has expanded to encompass other sectors, thereby highlighting the importance of care work in broader public service and administration contexts. However, administrative roles also perform critical functions by preparing and enabling organizations for transformation, both internally and through their interactions with other alliance actors. These administrative tasks are essential with regard to efforts to promote collaboration and shared action with the aim of fostering systemic change.

While this study did not focus on co-creation or co-production with citizens directly, I suggest that we should recognize the fact that emotional labour - care and relational work - also occurs among individuals who work through ‘cold hands’. This process does not involve redefining administrative roles as ‘warm’ but rather acknowledging that emotional labour is intrinsic to the role of cold hands. This relational work is crucial with respect to the transformation of the public sector into a space in which social innovation can thrive. This study reveals that such mechanisms are equally important in the relationships among administrative actors. If the public sector is to become fertile ground for social innovation, cross-sector collaboration requires these ‘cold hands’ to engage in the emotional labour that is necessary to establish and maintain effective partnerships. Emotional, often invisible labour is a key driver of systemic change in the context of public sector innovation.

By introducing the notion of ‘warm facts’, I counter the cold, hard facts that have been emphasized as part of the ‘data-driven’ approach, which, as I argue in Article

C, often serve as a barrier to the pursuit of systemic change. According to Haxeltine et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of social innovation, changing social relations involves new ways of doing, organizing, framing, and knowing. One element of this change in 'knowing' involves the incorporation of warm data - the kind of knowledge that is produced through human interactions and relationships. Warm facts encompass the nuances and qualitative insights that we obtain through direct contact with people, their experiences, and their emotions; these facts can often be overlooked by purely quantitative, data-driven approaches and understandings. Warm facts draw attention to the relational aspects of knowledge, which are critical with respect to efforts to foster social innovation. These aspects are not easily measurable or reducible to numbers, but they are valuable with respect to efforts to shape the contextual understanding that is necessary for transformative change. As this dissertation reveals, while cold facts rely on metrics and performance indicators, warm facts acknowledge the emotional, empathetic, and intangible forms of knowing that emerge from human-centred processes. Although these forms of knowledge are more elusive, they provide essential insights into the ways in which people interact with systems, perceive change, and engage in collaboration and innovation.

Warm data, therefore, complement systemic thinking by acknowledging that genuine systemic change cannot be achieved solely through the optimization of measurable variables; rather, such change must be achieved by fostering deeper, relational connections among actors within the system. These connections - which are based on trust, empathy, and a shared understanding - drive the collaborative processes that are necessary for systemic transformation. Ignoring these warm facts in favour of purely cold, data-driven decisions would limit our ability to understand the full complexity of the systems that we aim to change. In the context of Collective Impact, warm facts offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of the relevant social dynamics and help foster the relational, collaborative mindset that is essential with respect to systemic change.

06.02.03 tainty

Embracing Slowness and Uncer-

Slowness has been a recurring theme throughout this PhD research, including in various aspects of the Collective Impact framework. This theme is present in the long-term perspective that Collective Impact demands, in the impatience for results that is often expressed by stakeholders, in the ethnographic method itself, and

in the expectations of actors associated with alliance regarding the sustained stability of Collective Impact initiatives, as explored in Article A. However, when I advocate for a focus on ‘embracing slowness’, I do not refer solely to the temporal notion of waiting patiently for long-term results. Slowness also involves taking the time to reflect deeply, to remain present in situations involving uncertainty, and to allow relational processes to unfold without the pressure of seeking quick fixes or the measurability associated with current perceptions of accountability. While quick results and short-term rewards might be appealing, they often stand in the way of the deep, sustainable change for which Collective Impact aims.

The paradox that many actors experience in this context pertains to the tension between a sense of urgency, which often takes the form of a ‘burning platform’ narrative, and the need for a slow, deliberate approach to the task of promoting invisible systemic change. While it may seem counterintuitive to elicit a sense of urgency and then proceed slowly, rushing to extinguish this metaphorical fire can prevent the kind of systemic transformation that Collective Impact seeks to achieve. Fire-fighting is reactionary; in contrast, systemic change is proactive and relational.

Slowness focuses on ‘being with’. Accordingly, it involves the complexity, the uncertainty, and the discomfort that characterize situations in which no immediate answers and solutions. It involves cultivating pockets of slowness within the public sector, which is characterized by fast-paced demands. Impatience with regard to fast results is a significant barrier to the transition towards a more sustainable and collaborative future. Garrity (2018) argued that transitioning to a sustainable world requires not only new models of behaviour but also an understanding of citizens’ mental models and their addiction to short-term rewards. The challenge in this context lies in recognition of the fact that genuine transformation, whether systemic or organizational, requires time, patience, and the courage to ignore the ease and comfort of staying with old ways of doing, as presented in article A.

In fact, courage is intimately linked with slowness (as discussed in Article C). Courage is required to resist the pressure to pursue immediate, measurable outcomes and instead to trust in the slow, often invisible process of establishing relational connections and transformative structures. Slowness allows for the planting of trees rather than picking low-hanging fruit, the latter of which is a favoured organizational term. Collective Impact somewhat embodies this philosophy of slowness. It is not a fast, transactional model but rather a model that fosters relational, transformative work that often remains hidden beneath the surface. However, this situation stands in contrast to the public sector’s tendency to focus on certainty and rapid results. Much of the potential of Collective Impact lies in its ability to offer an

alternative organizational structure that embraces uncertainty, promotes deep collaboration, and facilitates the slow but steady process of systemic change.

06.03 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this dissertation provides valuable empirical insights into the adaptation and application of the Collective Impact framework and makes important theoretical contributions to the field of social innovation through the integration of systemic change, it holds several limitations that must be addressed.

First off, the study concentrated on one Danish case and one local government in a specific national setting. While this has given the opportunity for in-depth fieldwork and qualitative insights, a methodological avenue for future research would be to conduct comparative studies of Danish Collective Impact initiatives, to widen the knowledge base on how the Collective Impact model is used across cases in the Danish context. Such studies could examine how Collective Impact frameworks are adapted to diverse contexts, including different sectors or regions or Nordic welfare states to better understand the broader applicability of the framework in similar governance contexts. A theoretical limitation was the limited availability of peer-reviewed literature on Collective Impact and the lack of robust theoretical underpinnings to a framework that was originally developed in a consultancy context and remains heavily influenced by grey literature.

Another key limitation lies in the framing of this *public* industrial PhD project, which primarily focused on the perspective of one partner, in the collaboration, the municipality. Future studies should engage with the viewpoints of other critical actors, particularly philanthropic foundations, to understand how their involvement, and access, influences systemic change efforts. If systemic change requires shifts in mindsets, worldviews, and essentially culture, then exploring the role of foundations as enablers of cultural change within municipalities is interesting, as it deals with the democratic implications of philanthropic involvement.

Another limitation to the Industrial PhD program this study was conducted under, was the placing of the researcher as colleague with informants. The dual work of having a role that was also meant to further the organization through research findings. While the positive aspects of such an insider position have been presented in chapter 04, it also comes with limitations. The primary limitations were the way data *moved*, set in motion by me as a researcher, constantly affecting and altering the

field. This made the data collected, not outdated, but quickly changing, as the organization would react and adjust based on my preliminary findings.

As is with ethnography (and social science research more generally), it tends to produce questions. This thesis has allowed for some of these questions to be pursued, responded to in the three articles constituting this dissertation. Allowing myself to lift my gaze a little, there are several unanswered questions and curiosities arising from this study, that would be beneficial to explore further.

First off, we must deepen our understanding of what systemic change could look like. Future studies could extend this work by investigating how we should explore the application of systemic thinking in areas beyond traditional systems like education or health, identifying tools and processes to analyze and evaluate systemic change across less formally defined systems. This would help operationalize systemic change as a concept and a practice. This study identifies barriers to systemic change, including the lack of strategic tools, language, and processes for pursuing such transformation practically. Future research should aim to develop and test frameworks for analyzing, evaluating, and facilitating systemic change. While this thesis provides an initial steppingstone by calling attention to the relational and mindset-driven nature of systemic change, further theoretical and practical work is needed to refine our understanding of how to sustain these efforts effectively. I agree with Boorman et al. (2023) in their statement that Collective Impact as localized approach should complement, but not replace national and global reforms supporting systemic change (p. 65), but want in addition to stress, that further research is needed to deepen our understanding of how these smaller and larger systems related and affects each other and are nested within each other. The last important research opportunity I want to highlight, is to take departure in the tension between being data-driven and systemic change, exploring what data means, in the public sector that increasingly seek new modes of collaborative governance.

06.04 Concluding Remarks

Towards the end of this dissertation, in the summer of 2024, Mark Kramer, one of the authors of the inaugural article on Collective Impact, sent waves of concern crashing through the social innovation community. Namely, he published an article in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, which was the same journal in which the 2011 Collective Impact article was published, titled “Where Strategic Philanthropy

Went Wrong”. In this article, which was written in collaboration with Steve Phillips, he argued that philanthropy has not and will never generate long-lasting solutions to societal problems, and he called attempts to do so ‘astonishingly ineffective’ (Kramer & Phillips, 2024). He no longer believed in the basis on which he, alongside others, initially developed the Collective Impact model. This claim was made in an American context and from a philanthropic perspective; it was based on the authors’ realization that, no matter how much effort philanthropic and nonprofit organizations invested in their efforts to address complex and wicked problems, only governments ultimately have the power and opportunity to promote this kind of large-scale social and systemic change: “The model of philanthropy we have relied on has not delivered - and cannot deliver - the societal improvements on a national scale that we so urgently need. The more we highlight philanthropy as the solution, the more we excuse government and corporations from the need to change”.

In the case investigated in this dissertation, i.e., MedVind I Østerbyen, (local) government was involved as a central actor from the beginning. Despite the role played by philanthropic foundations in initiating the collaboration and identifying this framework as a possible structure, the municipality played the role of ‘host’ for the organization, which was a collective achievement. This study also reveals that the potential for the Collective Impact framework lies in a close relation to the system that is the target of the proposed change. In meetings with both the welfare state and public administration in the form of the local government, the Collective Impact framework was highlighted.

Discussing potentials involves speaking about a future that might be. The potential of MedVind lies in the ability of Collective Impact to occupy a position that is both rooted in the public sector and able to overcome bureaucratic expectations as well as the rigidly and clearly defined boundaries among different management silos in the context of public administration. Although initial indications that the mindset of relevant actors has shifted towards a more collaborative and relational approach are evident, this case remains haunted by the ghost of New Public Management past, or the ‘zombified version’ of NPM that Wilson et al. (2014) presented.

Ultimately, I want to conclude this dissertation with a claim that I started writing for my introduction but then deleted, as I felt that it was too daring as a beginning to my dissertation. I have now decided that I am going to conclude with this claim instead: *Systemic change is boring innovation*. Systemic change can be (unbearably) slow and feel unbearably uncertain and intangible; furthermore, it does not fit easily into existing organizational or institutional structures, which are dominated by a mind-set of accountability and legitimized on the basis of measurable results that are

rooted in the logic of performance management that was made so prevalent by NPM. In this context, I do not mean to say that systemic change is boring in the sense of unimportant or unworthy of resources or the attention of practitioners or researchers; rather, I claim that it is boring in the sense that it is rarely worthy of newspaper headlines. It is quiet and often invisible. Such innovation is rooted in bureaucracy, governance, intersector and organizational relations, and power. At present, the fields of management and public administration and innovation are characterized by a virtual fairytale discourse. Such fairytales focus on ‘wicked’ or evil problems that must be slain by the ‘magic’ concepts of trust, co-creation and social innovation. Ultimately, this managerial fairytale story lacks a hero. Namely, one aspect of what makes systemic change a form of boring innovation is such a missing hero (whether an individual organization, person or partnership) who can be celebrated. What in Collective Impact is emphasized as the sharing of credit, is what opposes this idea of a single heroic actor.

Systemic change, as an essential component of social innovation, represents innovation that occurs through alterations of the relationships among the people who form the systems that constitute our society. Systemic change has become part of Danish public discourse regarding how we can make society better, including through conversations among agents of change, nonprofits and philanthropic and policy agencies. This study reveals that the ‘system’ to which people refer when they speak of systemic change is the public sector and that systemic change be easier to engage in if we return to ideas of systemic thinking and thus perceive our society as a holistic ecosystem that consists of relationships - particularly relationships in which these actors are themselves included as agents of change, thus allowing for systemic action and change in the local context on the basis of a shift in mindset.

Marisol de la Cadena, in a conversation regarding her work on onto-epistemic openings and ‘not-knowing’¹⁶ (Cadena, 2021), highlighted the fact that “If we keep speaking the same languages, we will tell the same stories”. I presume that this comment was made in reference to Haraway’s argument that “it matters what stories tell stories” (Haraway 2016, p.). In line with this way of thinking, I believe that not only will the stories that we tell be the same; the conversations that we have will be as well. In many ways, this dissertation focuses on speaking other languages, having other conversations and telling other stories. It pertains to the development

¹⁶ Conversation during the PhD course Experimenting with Ethnography, making time-space for analysis, which was held at DTU 21–23, 2023.

of an organizational form - and a way of being together - that can enable people who speak different (institutional and organizational) languages to gather around the same table, thereby allowing them to have different conversations and ultimately tell different stories: stories about the people in their community, about each other, about their work, and about their struggles, stories that alter and expand people's mindsets. This dissertation also focuses on a researcher who speaks the language of academia and theories but engages in discussion with practitioners who, in this case, could use only metaphorical language to describe their actions.

Ultimately, this dissertation aims to further the conversation and academic stories regarding how we can collaboratively transform society through systems with a focus on human relationships through acts of engagement and care at the local level.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

As all interviewees have been Danish, the interview guide has been translated from Danish to English for the purpose of the dissertation.

Metadata

Interviews with all members of MedVind i Østerbyen's partner and steering group (14 people) during the period from November 1 to December 6, 2020, as part of Work Package 2 in the industrial PhD project. All 14 members can be found on MedVind's website, but information about the informants is excluded to ensure their statements cannot be traced back to them as individuals. The interviews will take place over Skype, will be recorded there, and deleted after transcription.

Before the interviews, the informants will sign a consent form regarding the collection and storage of data in compliance with GDPR, Esbjerg Municipality's data policy, and the PhD project's Data Management Plan. The transcriptions will be stored on SDU's drive. The interviews are part of an ethnographic data collection, supplemented by participant observations, document analysis, and informal conversations, and will be semi-structured in nature.

I have met all the informants prior to the interviews at previous partner and steering group meetings. They have contributed to approving the PhD project and are therefore familiar with the purpose of the interviews and the PhD project as a whole. A concern, and potential limitation, could be that the informants perceive the interviews as an evaluation of their work in MedVind and that the industrial researcher is closely tied to the organization's leadership, causing them to withhold negative comments. It is therefore crucial to try to create a confidential space, even though this is complicated by the digital meeting format, where the informants feel they can speak freely and not just provide a standard "script." I will emphasize my neutral position, my arm's-length principle, and my role as a researcher rather than an evaluator.

The purpose of the interviews is:

-To explore whether the organization's closest members have experienced collaboration, their own role, and their understanding of Collective Impact.

-To identify factors that either facilitate or hinder the work (e.g., resistance, perception of potential, what is possible and what is not – and why).

Questions:

What is MedVind to you?
What is your role in MedVind?
Why are you in the steering committee/partner group?
How does MedVind affect your work?
What do you believe to be the role of the backbone?
Hvad do you think MedVind can do, and what can it not do? Why?
How does your organization/institution/business contribute to the shared agenda?
What is the hardest part of participating? What do you experience as easy?
Has MedVind changed what is hard and what is easy?
What is your biggest fear about this collaboration?
Can you remember a situation in which you have acted different than previously after joining MedVind?
Have you experienced any changes in Østerbyen? Why do you believe that has, or has not, happened?
Have you participated in other forms of cross-sector collaboration? If yes, How do you experience working with Collective Impact to be different, or similar to those?
How do you experience the collaborative work?
What does success look like for MedVind? Where do you see Østerbyen, and MedVind, in 12 years when the collaborative agreement expires?

Appendix 2: On the use of generative AI

Since the start of this dissertation in 2020, generative AI has emerged as an increasingly used tool within academia. In the final stages of this dissertation, I have used ChatGPT in accordance with SDU guidelines¹⁷.

I have used ChatGPT as a resource to support aspects of writing and editing. Specifically, I have used it to find synonyms for words, address grammatical errors, translation, structuring and feedback. Example of a prompt I have used: I have written this abstract for a conference I am participating in called xxx. Pretend you are an experienced academic scholar within public management giving feedback to a PhD student, what would your three critiques of this abstract be. Another example is the use of ChatGPT to prompt illustrations for PowerPoint presentations at conferences.

All ideas, research questions, writing, analysis, and scholarly work in this dissertation are entirely my own.

¹⁷ https://mitsdu.dk/da/mit_studie/kandidat/statskundskab/vejledning-og-support/aipaasdu



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