

Using Collective Impact Principles to Drive Systemic Change

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Abstract:

Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF) was established in 2012 to address multifaceted community challenges in Montgomery County, Maryland, and increase opportunities for cross-sector community stakeholders to exchange ideas and collaborate. MMF's collective impact efforts rely heavily on a Leadership Group (LG) drawn from the public and private sectors in the county to move its initiatives forward. The LG also engages with local policymakers to help create institutional change in more formal ways, as shown in its Calls to Action for workforce development and early childhood education. The LG created a logic model to build a shared understanding of its work and goals and as a tool for communicating with community stakeholders. MMF's Accountability Workgroup developed performance measures aligned with the logic model and tenets of collective impact. In 2022 the workgroup surveyed MMF leaders and community partners to understand better the strengths and gaps of its collective impact activities.

Introduction

Through collective impact efforts, individuals representing different sectors collaborate to promote systemic change (Collective Impact Forum 2023). Collective impact involves creating a common agenda, monitoring progress using common metrics, integrating multiple perspectives and capabilities, facilitating interagency coordination, and encouraging participation from individuals who are committed to engaging in activities that will increase the likelihood of achieving a shared goal (Collective Impact Forum 2023).

Leaders from Nonprofit Montgomery, an organization in Montgomery County, Maryland, that convenes organization leaders to strengthen the nonprofit sector, observed that the county lacked formal methods allowing community stakeholders to exchange strategies and collaborate to address local challenges. In 2012 they established Montgomery Moving Forward (MMF), using the collective impact model as the foundation from which local leaders convene to identify and address local challenges.

MMF leaders affected sustainable change by (1) creating a structure for stakeholder engagement, (2) creating a logic model to communicate MMF's theory of change, (3) engaging local legislators to facilitate policy development, and (4) making data-driven decisions about MMF processes and strategies.

Stakeholder Engagement Structure

MMF is guided by a Leadership Group (LG) comprising established and emerging leaders across public and private sectors in Montgomery County. LG members participate in one of three workgroups: to increase accountability, identify the biggest county challenges to address, and develop strategies to sustain MMF operations. Nonprofit Montgomery representatives participate in the LG, facilitate meetings, inform fundraising efforts, and lead efforts to galvanize the community and promote action. The success of collaborative partnerships hinges on having a strong group of diverse leaders and meaningful contributions (monetary and in-kind). MMF leaders recruit potential LG members based on aligning local leaders' expertise with MMF's goals and objectives. Over the past few years, MMF leadership has taken steps to increase membership diversity, recognizing that there was inadequate involvement from individuals who are affected by community change efforts.

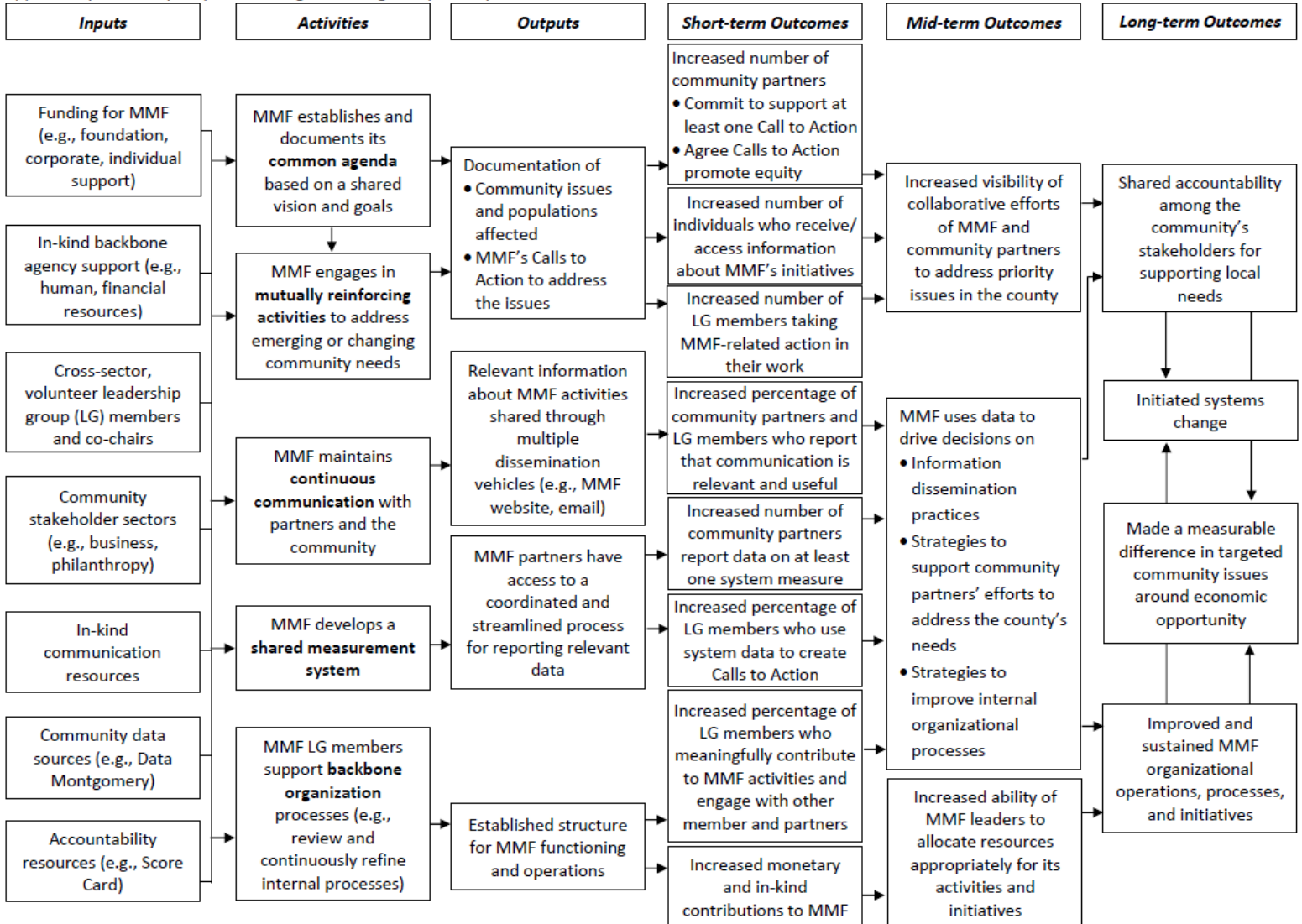
Logic Model

MMF created a logic model to visually depict the theory underlying how and why certain changes are expected to occur (Exhibit 1). The model shows inputs (resources) that support the execution of MMF activities; major MMF activities; resulting outputs (deliverables) from the activities; and short-, mid-, and long-term outcomes representing the immediate, gradual, and systemic changes that are expected to occur as a result of MMF's activities. MMF has used the logic model to build a shared understanding among LG members of the work being conducted and the initiative's goals, communicate the importance of its activities to external stakeholders, seek funding, and garner interest in future collaboration.

Exhibit 1. MMF logic model

Logic Model for Montgomery Moving Forward's (MMF's) Collective Impact

Theory of change: MMF's leadership in convening community partners and facilitating implementation of initiatives to address key community issues around economic opportunity will catalyze systems change in Montgomery County, MD.



Local Legislator Engagement

It is important to engage policymakers who can create formal institutional change. Thus in 2014, MMF convened local leaders to discuss workforce development in Montgomery County and subsequently released a Call to Action summarizing the challenges, describing action steps, and outlining data on the county's workforce (Montgomery Moving Forward 2014). Over 100 community leaders endorsed MMF's central recommendation to have one structure guiding workforce development countywide. The result was the Montgomery County Executive declaring a plan to revamp workforce development in the county, followed by County Council

approval of legislation to establish WorkSource Montgomery, Inc. This initiative was one of the first systems in the county to link economic and workforce development.ⁱ

MMF established a second Call to Action in 2018 focused on early care and education after conducting a series of knowledge-building events (e.g., convening meetings with experts and conducting site visits to early childhood education programs). This effort led to strategic partnerships for resource development, including the Early Care and Education Toolkitⁱⁱ and inter-organizational coordination. MMF led a town hall meeting and symposium, with participants ranging from childcare providers to county government representatives, to discuss its proposal for the Early Care and Education Coordinating Entity. The Montgomery County Council passed Bill 42-21 to create a public-private partnership that provides recommendations to ensure that working parents, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, have equal access to high-quality early childhood education programs for their children (Montgomery County Council 2022).

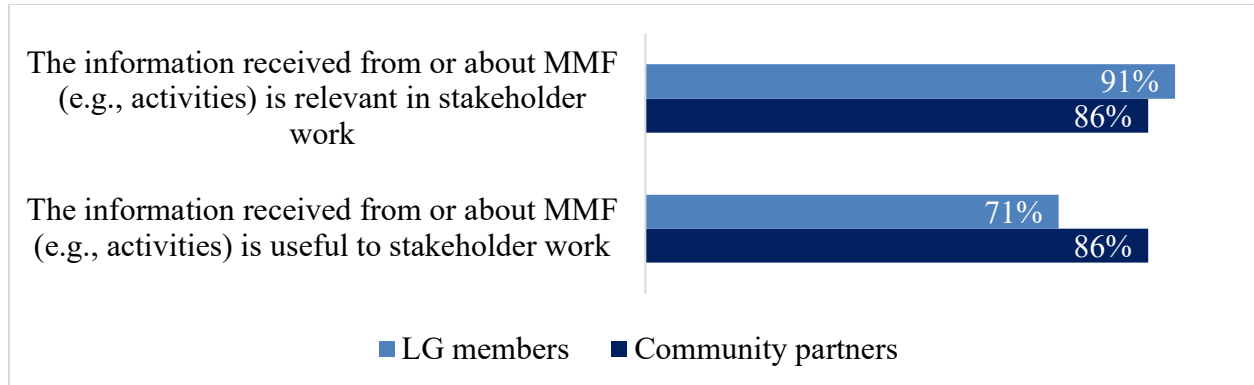
Data-driven Decision-making

MMF's Leadership Group developed 10 performance measures aligned with the logic model and five principles of collective impact (e.g., number of community partners who support MMF Calls to Action; percentage of LG members reporting communication among members is useful). In 2022, MMF's Accountability workgroup administered surveys and conducted focus groups to better understand the strengths and gaps of MMF's collective impact activities from the perspectives of community partners and the LG.

Surveys

Most LG members who completed a survey (n=35)ⁱⁱⁱ reported that they used their expertise to help MMF achieve its goals (77%), and they reported having opportunities to meaningfully contribute to MMF activities (80%) and engage with other LG members and partners (74%). All community partners who completed a survey (n=22) reported they supported at least one MMF Call to Action, and over 80% reported they are likely to support a new MMF Call to Action. Although the response rate for the community partner survey was low (36%), survey results suggest that respondents' previous experience with MMF action planning and engagement strategies makes them likely to partner with MMF again to advance future Calls to Action. Respondents represent different sectors of the community (e.g., businesses, nonprofit organizations, government, philanthropy), and nearly 90 percent of respondents agreed that MMF's activities are relevant (86%) and useful (86%) to their work (Figure 1).

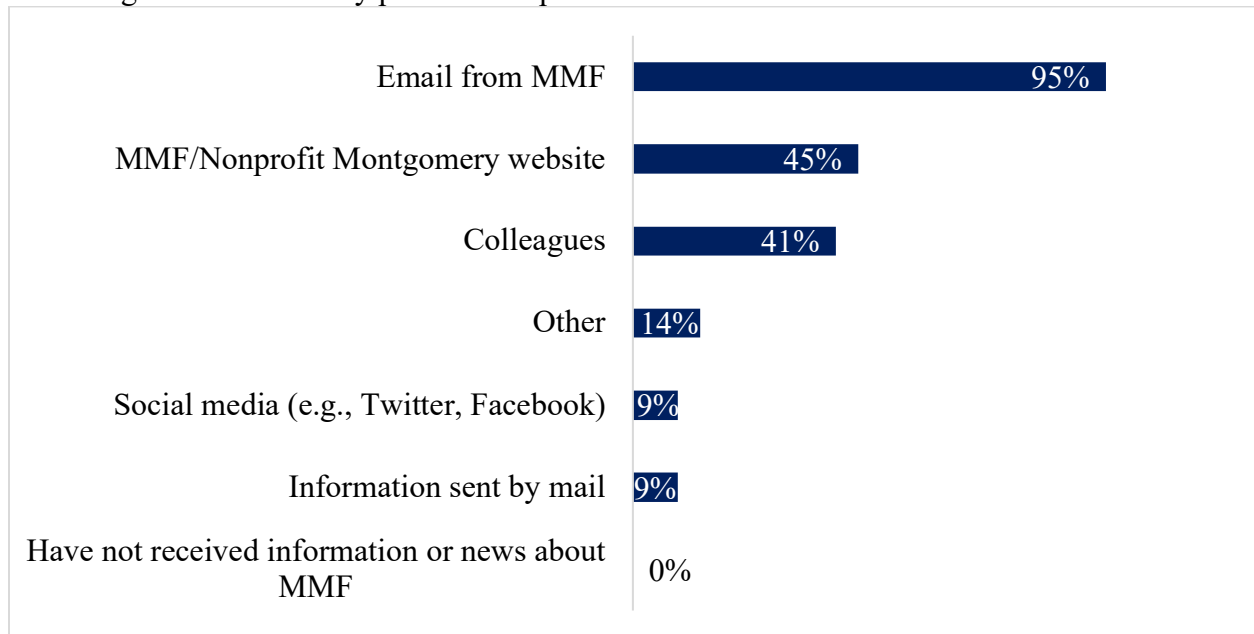
Figure 1. LG and community members’ level of agreement about the usefulness and relevance of MMF’s activities to their work



Note: LG members: n=34, community partners: n=22

All community partners who completed a survey reported that they received information from MMF through at least one information dissemination vehicle (Figure 2). They received information about MMF news and activities most often through email messages, by visiting the MMF’s web pages (available through Nonprofit Montgomery’s website), and through word of mouth. Survey results confirm that MMF may want to increase its presence on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), as many people use them as key sources of information. Only 9% of community partners who completed a survey reported that they received MMF-related information from social media.

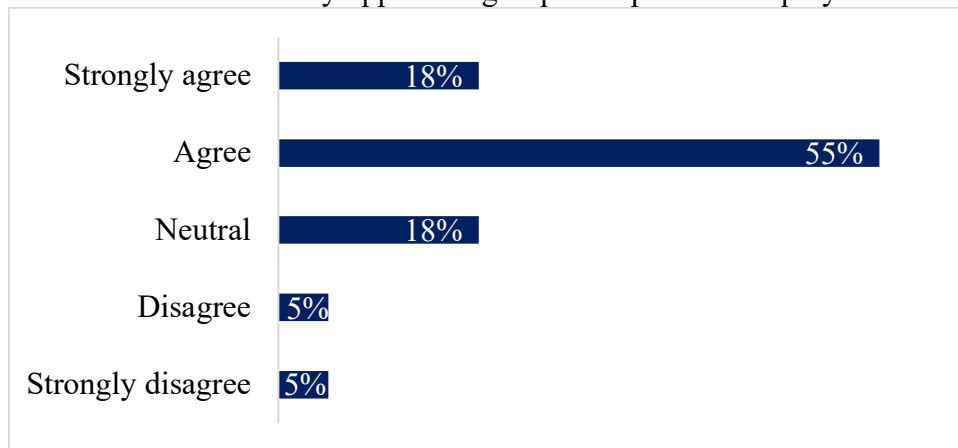
Figure 2. Community partner receipt of information about MMF news and activities



Note: n=22

Nearly three-quarters of community partners surveyed agreed that MMF’s activities focus on underserved community members and the promotion of equitable policies and practices (Figure 3). MMF’s overarching goal is to address community challenges in Montgomery County, Maryland, to ensure that its diverse population of residents has equal access to high-quality childcare, employment opportunities, and other necessities. It is critical that MMF and other similar initiatives prioritize equity and inclusion in their work and continually monitor the extent to which members of the community *perceive* that the initiative prioritizes equity and inclusion. If community members perceive these topics as not a priority, stakeholders could consider action planning to ensure equity is considered in strategies and adjust the messaging emphasizing *how* action planning addresses the needs of underserved populations.

Figure 3. Community partner perceptions of the extent to which MMF prioritizes marginalized and historically oppressed groups and promotes equity



Note: n=22

Focus groups

LG members also participated in focus groups to discuss the survey results. For each performance measure, the group identified: (1) factors that contributed to or limited success, (2) partners who can advance work on future issues, (3) successful processes or practices, (4) strategies for ensuring future success, and (5) recommendations for improvement. By participating in focus groups, the LG explored strengths and gaps in MMF’s efforts and, more importantly, identified action plans to improve community engagement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Over the past 10 years, MMF has successfully created systemic change through its leadership structure by developing a theory of action to explain how MMF’s actions are related to expected outcomes, engaging local policymakers to enact local legislation, and making data-driven decisions. MMF, like other similar initiatives, largely achieves success because of dedicated leaders who champion the work. In addition to the need to continually seek funding, collective

impact efforts require meaningful participation from cross-sector leaders and steadfast advocacy and persistence to move issues from ideas to action.

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ⁱ <https://worksourcemontgomery.com/>

ⁱⁱ <http://ecetoolkit.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The response rate for the LG survey was 90%.