

# *Looking for Signals:*

Multisolvers in their own words



In late 2022, Multisolving Institute embarked on a small research project to explore how multisolvers work; what impacts they are having in their communities and sectors; what challenges they face; and how they track and evaluate their impact.

We interviewed nine leaders of multisectoral work in the US, Canada, and Mexico. The research team listened to recordings, read and analyzed transcripts, and discussed what was learned.

This little booklet offers a synthesis of sorts. Quite by accident, it became a poem. A found poem made up of the actual words and phrases used by interviewees.

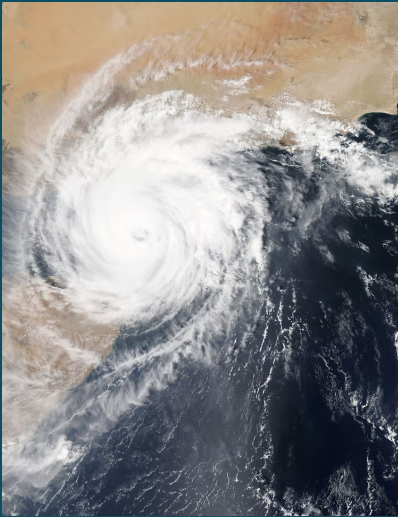
We hope you recognize your voices and lived experience in these pages. Our deepest gratitude for your time, wisdom, passion, and help with this project.

--May 1, 2023



multisolving (*v*): using one investment of time or effort to solve several problems at once in a way that also improves equity

# Motivation



Things are going wrong.  
In too many places.  
Injustice. Emissions. Disasters.  
Housing too expensive to make home.  
Illness. And no health care anywhere nearby.  
Informal settlements destroying wetlands.  
Fragmentation.  
Stolen power.  
We don't have time - or energy -  
to do it all alone.  
So we wanted to go upstream.  
Look for the root causes.  
Help people live into the full potential of their lives.  
Go on a healing journey.  
Repair.  
Focus on prevention.  
Find our shared purpose.  
Shared commitment.  
Follow our passion to build community  
and put equity  
at the beginning.  
In the middle.  
And in the end.



# Duration of Efforts

Some of us  
just got started.  
And some of us  
have been at it  
for 3, 4, 5, 6, 10 or 20 and more years.



# Initial Collaborators



We are willing collaborators.  
Learning.  
Starting with a brilliant leader.  
Or a small team.  
Preexisting relations.  
Now training others.  
Building from what is there.  
Building networks.  
Expanding.  
No one is ever turned away.



# Turning Points

And so we are seeing shifts.  
Things have started turning.  
After the data report.  
After the health briefs.  
When the earthquake hit.  
When efforts went national.  
When we built a bridge to that other agency.  
When we got the money.  
When people reached across old divisions.  
When researchers turned to residents.  
When others started calling us, wanting to learn.  
When the artist became an activist.  
And the farmer changed his mind.  
When people got honest with themselves  
And others.  
When they stopped blaming outsiders.  
And assumed agency.



# Enablers

How did we do it?  
We took a lot of time to listen.  
We built relationships.  
And capacity.  
And failure tolerance.  
Had the necessary human resources.  
And a 3-year planning grant.  
Blended funding.  
Gave up pay.  
It took imagination.  
And aspiration.  
We set priorities.  
But held things loosely.  
Adapted.





# Changes in Thinking



We changed our thinking.  
We disrupted and ruffled feathers.  
We found slow openings in conversations.  
People have started to think more critically.  
More deeply.  
They know more and feel stronger now.  
They have voice.  
And are heard.  
They've shifted from focusing on single problems  
to systems thinking.  
At the beginning they had divergent interests.  
Now they are more on the same page.  
We realized that working in partnerships  
is the smart way to go.  
We've become a learning organization.  
We are willing to make the effort  
To learn about each other.  
We actually want to learn.  
We look beyond our old silos.  
For opportunities.  
To solve multiple problems at once.  
We are breaking out of business as usual.  
We are seeing whole.  
We are taking ownership.

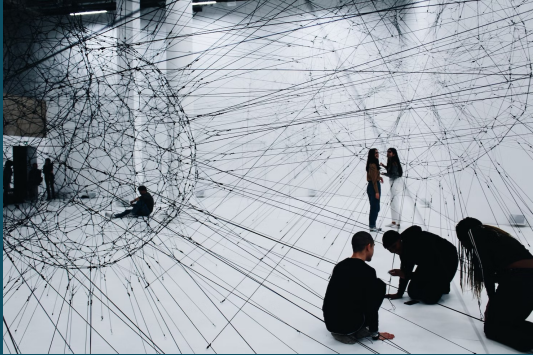
# Changes in the Narrative



The narrative, too, has changed.  
We are shifting from thinking about downstream problems  
to talking about upstream interventions.  
From the gloom-and-doom  
overwhelming topic of climate change  
to showcasing bright spots.  
From talking about gentrification  
to talking about financial security.  
From health to mental health.  
From obstacles and isolation  
to aging and living well with disability and dementia.  
We're including community voices.  
We are packaging it  
in accessible and compelling ways.  
We are galvanizing people.  
Opening possibilities.  
We're opening spaces  
for people to listen to each other  
and see a different world.  
And we are seeing the change:  
Not just worry and desperation.  
No, it's constant change now  
for the good of the people.



# Changes in Relationships



We're also seeing changes in social relations.  
Because it's almost 100% relational.  
We have trusted relationships.  
A partnership network.  
A learning network.  
Some are uncommon collaborations.  
Some unholy alliances.  
But everyone has to get something out of the collaboration.  
So we think hard about  
what every partner has to bring.  
We deal with power dynamics.  
We get into places of discomfort.  
Gardens enable us to get into conversation.  
Relationships enable us to care.  
And we track the quality and depth of relationships.  
We see value in these very slow interactions.  
We move at the speed of trust.

# Changes in Practice

Already, we are seeing changes in practices.

People find simple solutions.

They use new tools.

Or existing processes for new ends.

They look at problems through a systems lens.

They use participatory approaches to research.

Build new skills.

Technical skills.

Essential partnership skills.

Support grantees in developing powerful proposals.

Combine separate plans into a comprehensive one.

Integrate new ideas into planning

And other spheres of municipal government.

We connect people to transit, to cash supports.

People come out of their houses.

Into the community garden.

They are physically active.

Eat fresh food.

And see beauty.







Together, We Create!



# Real Impacts

We have seen real, lasting impact.  
We have seen energy and cost savings.  
Emission reductions.  
We're making mobility easier for the elderly.  
We've gotten improvements to our streets  
And the sewer system.  
We're creating jobs.  
We've trained people.  
We help people pay rent.  
Put food on the table for their children.  
Improved food security with four community  
gardens  
And emergency food deliveries.  
Parents and grandparents have enough  
to provide for their family the basic needs.  
Water. Shelter. Food.  
We now have two restaurants.  
A gas station.  
A hardware store.  
A drug store.  
A newspaper.  
Two health clinics  
where previously there was none.  
We have playgrounds.  
A youth empowerment group.  
Drug, alcohol and suicide prevention.  
Walking tracks.  
Young people learning life skills.  
Mutual aid after the disaster.  
Green investments.  
Money flowing differently now.



Of course, not all is achieved yet.  
The coffee shop is still coming.  
In time, the old and those with disabilities  
will be able to live better and stay at  
home longer.  
Affordable housing will be accessible  
housing.  
Police will ensure safety with a social work  
lens.  
But we have learned what matters to  
people.  
We better understand gentrification  
and financial security.  
We are now having a regional  
conversation  
about housing and transportation.  
We're empowering communities.  
We're changing identities.  
We are becoming change makers.

# Changes in Political Engagement



People who we trained and who learned now want to go out and do.

We have follow-on projects that aim at policy change.

Our lay resident researchers now use the data for local and state advocacy.

Our community leader fellows have a voice in municipal governance.

Someone now sits on Biden's Justice40 Council, and we're seeing the emergence of a national just growth agenda.

It's true politics:

invest in your people  
and they invest in you.

# Changes in Funding

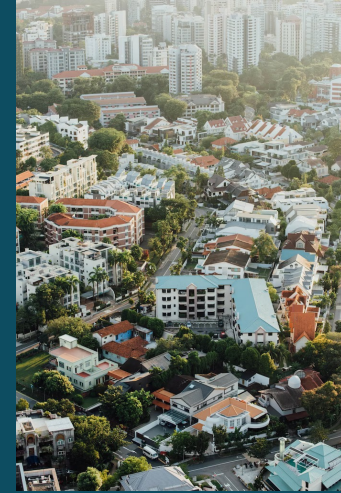
And speaking of investment:  
We developed a model  
to scale out what we learned.  
Our grantees leverage the funding they got.  
People are helping each other  
access more government funding.  
Our research is changing  
how funding flows.





# Institutionalizing Change

And we're making it stick.  
We advocate for durable solutions.  
Our work has survived changes in administrations.  
Formalized and coalesced our approach to research  
across the organization.  
Integrated age, illness, and disability into municipal plans.  
We have a new strategic plan now.  
And we passed an energy performance standard.  
We co-founded an NGO  
So we can do citizen science with communities.  
We are becoming part of the community.  
And even though the money has run out  
there will be coffee place in town.  
So we can continue  
the conversation.



# Hurdles to Multisolving

Surely, it's not easy.  
So much gets in the way.  
Lack of time.  
Lack of transparency.  
Bureaucracy.  
The sheer complexity of things.  
Inadequate funding.  
And separate funding streams.  
Different perspectives.  
Different missions.  
Different needs.  
Different timeframes.  
Different approaches.  
Different personalities.  
People refusing to think big.  
See each others' humanity.  
Limited capacity.  
A culture that only looks to the achievements of one  
And fails to recognize the work of the many.  
It's tiring.  
Frustrating.  
You have to be bendable.



# Tracking the Difference We Make



But evaluation can help.  
A new kind of evaluation.  
Democratized evaluation.  
Evaluation as navigation.  
Evaluation as learning.  
We are learning to track our achievements.  
With a handful of metrics.  
But it takes the whole village to evaluate.  
We're wondering how to track  
changes in social relations.  
The adoption of values.  
How to see systems that are invisible  
and therefore uninvestable.  
We have to be relentless  
in measuring movement.  
Not just our progress from where we've been.  
but our proximity to our North Star.  
The moral compass.

# Onward

It's a labor of love.  
In any case, we've moved the needle.  
We've come a long way.  
We're seeing the signals.  
We're seeing change.







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