

MEASURE UP: A CALL TO ACTION

Principles for Measuring Rural and Native Nation Development Progress

- 1 Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.
- 2 Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local — and mutual — sense.
- 3 Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development — not against an ideal "success" standard.
- 4 Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides — and increases in the participation and decision-making that reduce these divides — as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.
- 5 Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.
- 6 Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.



The results of the TRALE 1 discussions produced six primary themes, each of which is articulated as one of Six Principles for Measuring Rural Development Progress. (See *Six Principles on page 6.*) For each principle, you will find:

- A summary discussion explaining the principle, background context, and why it is important to rural practitioners.
- A set of key quotes from TRALE participants that underline points in that discussion.
- A set of Call to Action recommendations for government, philanthropy, and rural practitioners on how to advance that principle in their respective roles.
- One very short story that underlines that specific principle – and likely other principles as well.

Also included in this Call to Action is an [Annotated List of Resources](#) relevant to rural measurement, organized into several categories. Resources on this list can help you dig deeper into what kinds and levels of rural data are and are not available, different approaches to categorizing rural places, sources for specific types of rural indicators, resources on Native community measurement and development, and information on frameworks that are being used to reorient the field toward measuring assets rather than deficits.

“What we measure becomes real and has consequences – measurements are drivers.”



Brandon Hofstedt

INTRODUCTION

Today we have a generational opportunity to strengthen both prosperity and equity in rural communities and Native nations in the United States.

The billions of dollars made available in COVID recovery funding as well as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act are historic. Should a version of it pass, the potential \$1 billion or more in the proposed Rural Partnership Program, would provide sorely needed flexible resources for strapped rural and regional development collaborations. How the Economic Development Administration designs and makes decisions about distribution of its unprecedented and significant increases in program funds, and how the Rural Development title is crafted in the likely 2023 Farm Bill reauthorization, among other legislative and administrative developments, may present additional opportunities to help communities and Native nations across the rural United States take the reins to strengthen economic, social, and health outcomes across their regions.

Likewise, several phenomena of the times have increased attention to rural populations, places, and businesses. For one example, the ravages of COVID and the opioid epidemic have raised consciousness about the worsening state of rural health and health care relative to urban. On the other side of the coin, fostered by the draw of outdoor recreation and family-raising quality of life, in recent years more people have moved from urban and suburban to rural places, which was further bolstered by the COVID-induced reality that many occupations can now work from anywhere. That phenomenon has both spotlighted the value of rural living and raised its cost, increasing hardships for lifelong rural residents and essential workers who can no longer afford it. In addition, the results of the 2020 Census, coupled with the growing cognizance of economic, social, and power inequities that have resulted from historic discriminatory practices, have raised awareness that one in four rural people are people of color – and that they account for the largest segment of growing or stabilizing population in many rural communities. Media coverage of these and other developments have piqued the interest of more foundations and individual investors, plus greater focus from the state and federal program levels, in rural community and economic development.

Any increased funding that accompanies this attention is necessary and welcome, but far from sufficient. Increased funding through the same program “pipes” will likely only give rural America more of the inequitable outcomes it has already



experienced. So some program redesign is required. Also required is a fundamental reassessment of **how** we measure rural development progress and success and **who** gets to decide. If we get this reassessment right, the funding pipeline from all sources – federal, state, philanthropic, and private – will have far greater impact, especially for our most isolated and/or disenfranchised rural and tribal neighbors. And considering the rare confluence of resources and attention in play, we must measure up to the opportunity before us. We must measure what matters to rural people and communities, based on their deep knowledge and lived experience about what will best deploy their many assets to successfully address their localized opportunities and challenges.

This Call to Action amplifies the voice of 46 community and economic development practitioners from across rural and Native nation communities in the United States who make that case. It is offered as a tool to **open and deepen conversations about better ways** for funders and investors to design programs through which rural community and economic development practitioners and collaborations have the flexibility and power to decide what is most important to take on right now, what progress looks like, and how to measure it.

THE TRALE 1 PROCESS: STRUCTURE, FOCUS, AND PARTICIPANTS

TRALE STRUCTURE

This Call to Action is the result of the first Thrive Rural¹ Action-Learning Process (TRALE). The objective of each TRALE process is to quickly tap on-the-ground insights and experiences to help generate some breakthrough thinking about what works and what's needed to push policy and practice toward increasing well-being for more people and places in rural communities and rural Native nation areas across the country, especially in areas of concentrated poverty. The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) conducts each TRALE process, working with a varying set of collaborating partners. In each TRALE process, Aspen CSG asks approximately 50 rural doers, practitioners, advocates, and innovators with grounded knowledge to answer a specific question important to advancing action that will increase rural prosperity and equity. The conversations with TRALE participants around each question take place in small groups of four to eight people each over a short period, no longer than two months.

TRALE 1 PARTICIPANTS AND PARTICIPATION

For this first TRALE process, Aspen CSG convened a total of 46 seasoned rural economic and community development practitioners from rural and Native nation communities across the United States. Each participant was recommended by national and regional organizations with deep engagement in rural America, including, in addition to Aspen CSG, the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, the Housing Assistance Council, and Rural LISC, among others. Aspen CSG invited recommended participants and offered an honorarium for their preparation and participation in the TRALE discussion. Each TRALE participant joined one of eight two-hour discussions with between four and eight people each in August and September 2021.

The 46 TRALE 1 participants work in many of the nation's nearly 2,000 rural counties. (Of the nation's 3,142 counties, 1,976 – 63% – are classified as rural.) Collectively, the diverse participants account for hundreds of years of experience in rural economic development, community human services and health, housing, transportation, small business development, family asset building, development finance, grassroots community engagement and advocacy, and regional development. They are respected, committed leaders in their communities. *See page 50 for the list of TRALE 1 participants.*



MEASURING RURAL DEVELOPMENT SUCCESS

Each TRALE 1 engagement addressed the issue of what indicators and measures should be used to signify short- and medium-term progress – and longer-term community and economic development success – for rural and rural Native nation communities. Participants were asked to share their own experience and ideas to answer two specific questions:



- 1 **What do we need to measure** to truly indicate progress at increasing prosperity and equity in rural places and populations over the short, medium, and long term?
- 2 **What will it take** for public, private, and philanthropic systems and investors to value, organize around, and use those measures?

¹ The Thrive Rural Framework is a tool to organize learning, strengthen understanding, and catalyze and align action around what it will take for communities and Native nations across the rural United States to be healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives. See: www.thriverural.org.

Participants were asked to keep the following context points in mind as they prepared for the TRALE discussion – context that made the two TRALE 1 questions timely and important.

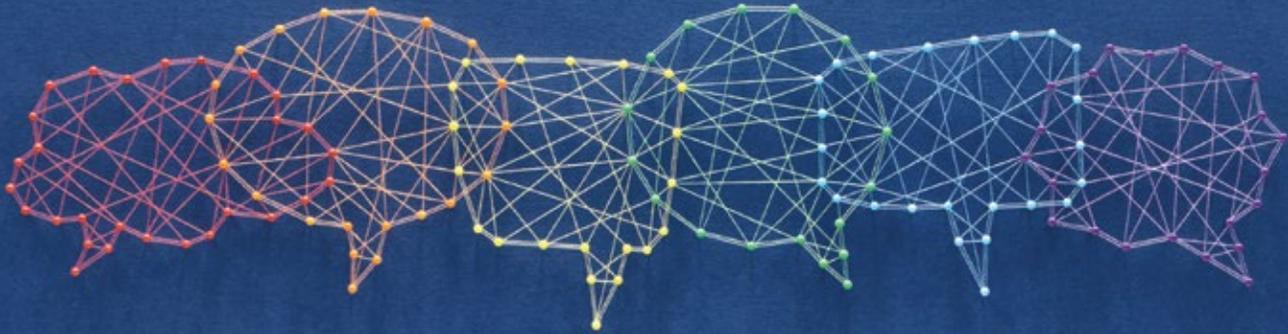
- First, for decades, rural community and economic practitioners have maintained that many indicators or measures of “success” that government, philanthropic, and private programs and investors ask them to produce and report are not well-suited or relevant to rural places. In some cases, investors are looking for raw aggregate numbers to show scale of impact, which always places rural investments at a disadvantage to urban options; in others, investors focus too narrowly on immediate job creation, dollars leveraged, or financial return-on-investment rather than the critical human, organizational, civic, and environmental ingredients that are fundamental to producing jobs and financial return over a longer term.
- Second, we are in a “moment” of increased attention to rural places and people, and of increased will on the part of government and philanthropy to examine (and potentially adjust) their practices and policies to better serve rural, advance rural prosperity, and strengthen rural-urban connections. In both government and philanthropic circles, some leaders are asking: “What should we be measuring in rural? And how can we do it?” We want to help provide useful answers to meet this opportunity.

TRALE 1: Important Context

The TRALE 1 participants contributed an abundance of rural development experience and knowledge, far more than could be included in a report focused primarily on measuring rural development progress and success. But, before detailing the six primary measurement principles that emerged from their exchanges, it is important to note two significant context issues that are important background to help understand working in rural America.

• **The Community Challenge of Using Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

The inadequacy of federal data was a refrain in many TRALE sessions. Because of the lower density in rural, the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey provides only a five-year rolling average for some key demographic data in many rural counties and sub-county areas, which is inadequate for developing or evaluating programs focused on producing results over one- or two-year time frames. More up-to-date statistics are collected and released annually or more frequently by the Department of Labor and the



Bureau of Economic Analysis, but for rural areas in general and sub-county rural areas in particular, they can be limited by requirements for data privacy. (When examining data from geographic areas with small participant numbers, outlier households and businesses can be easily identified; to maintain privacy, that small-area data may be suppressed.) In 2020, the Urban Institute, Housing Assistance Council, and Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group released [In Search of “Good” Rural Data](#), which details the challenge of securing and using reliable and accurate quantitative data and data methods in rural and Native communities. That report briefly notes emerging data sources and methods that use proprietary private data or new national surveys. Practitioners in diverse settings pointed to the need for new qualitative measurement methodologies and to best practices to better capture community conditions and perspectives.

• Native Nation Realities

Native nations are mostly rural in setting, but culture, governance, and historic and ongoing oppression make their realities different from the rest of rural America. Aspen CSG recently released [Native Nation Building: It Helps Rural America Thrive](#). This Field Perspectives brief outlines components of the historic oppression, cultural distinction, and sovereignty that differentiate Native nation conditions and realities, and describes nation-building strategies that are essential to strengthen Native culture and prosperity and link it to broader rural development efforts. TRALE participants from Native nations, passionate and steeped in their current and ancestors’ lived realities, underlined those differentiations while contributing deep insight and resonance to the TRALE findings overall.

As Lakota Vogel put it: ***“It really is important to understand that the difference between rural America and Native America is that we’ve been through a forced assimilation...where the government was hoping we would just melt away into the fabric of America.”*** Others noted issues of data sovereignty and the importance of understanding that tribal lands and communities are not like civic municipalities. Pamela Standing explained:

“People don’t understand when they work with us; they treat us like we’re a municipality and that we have access to all these resources that a township or city or municipality has. We don’t have access to those resources. We are in the process of building the legal and physical infrastructure that we need to grow a diverse and thriving economy in our communities.”

They also pointed to the decades of determined Native effort to rectify injustice and exercise sovereignty, now growing in strength. Standing again: “I heard an elder say something once. I’m going to probably say it wrong, but she said ‘They didn’t realize when they tried to bury us that we were the seed, and, you know, so we’re still here.’” Weaving these realities of Native history, conditions, culture, organization, and assets is critical to advancing both Native and rural prosperity in any region.



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PRINCIPLES FOR MEASURING RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

1

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2

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3

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal "success" standard.

4

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that reduce these divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

5

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

6

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.



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MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.

Rural and Native nation communities are astonishingly complex. This is counter to conventional thinking that life is simpler, that it is less expensive to live, and that things are easier to change and accomplish in rural places than in urban areas. None of these stereotypes is typically the case.

One thing that *may* be easier in rural places is to quickly and clearly discern the connections and the impact that action – or *inaction* – on one issue or condition has on other issues and conditions. Rural development practitioners are quick to note, for example, when regional educational institutions offer training regimens for job skills that are a mismatch with what local employers demand, or when lack of transportation or childcare for workers is the true impediment keeping local people from attaining better jobs or hindering local employers from expanding. Likewise, they can see the difference that one key change – for example, a Main Street building restoration, the resurgence of an annual festival that draws outsiders and sparks youth participation, the start of one new locally owned enterprise, the creation of a dozen new childcare slots, the clean-up of one eyesore or environmental hazard, the presence of a circuit-riding doctor or dentist one day a week in the community, or a few workforce housing energy retrofits that improve family bottom lines – can have on moving things in a new direction across a community.

These “asset changes” are often critical preconditions to achieving the more conventional and longer-term measures that many public, private, and philanthropic funders require rural projects to report as “development progress.” Those more conventional measures – for example, the number of new jobs, the volume and extent of loans, or return on standard investments – are often inappropriate in rural communities. This is especially true in places that have, for example, been historically left out or discriminated against, that need prerequisite skill building, or that must address other community, family, or worker priorities first. These other “asset changes” are thus more important and useful measures of progress during some stages of rural development. And, unless they are accomplished, the more conventional measures of progress may never be in reach.

Many funders stick with the conventional measures for understandable reasons. Data on them may be more easily or universally available across place because it is collected nationwide by government sources; thus, it is easier to aggregate “impact” across a set of a funder’s investments if each funded effort is required to report on the same publicly available indicators. In addition, reporting easily countable and tangible things like jobs created and loans made makes it easier for leaders to claim or assign credit for success.

Rural development practitioners are asking for flexibility to allow and use a broader, more holistic set of community and economic development progress measurements. Doing so encourages local analysis that drills down to a place’s specific economic sectors and geographies, that identifies the real factors that stand in the way of next-level progress, and that gauges whether supports and systems are in place to catalyze and sustain longer-term progress. Over just the course of the eight TRALE group discussions, practitioners suggested numerous alternative economic and community metrics.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.



For example:

- The stock of year-round, locally owned housing
- Change in school enrollments
- The number/ratio of disconnected youth
- Increases in post-secondary educational attainment
- Labor market participation rates
- Changes from an accurate baseline in the number and growth of locally owned enterprises
- Business longevity and growth rates
- Growth in high wage/high demand sectors
- Changes in race, ethnicity, and gender wage gaps
- Affordable child care slots compared to demand
- Community college alignment with local economy
- Aligned continuum of family services
- Entrepreneurial growth as voluntary or involuntary (Is self-employment only an emergency response?)
- Dollar leakage in or out of the community
- Change in air, water, housing quality
- Economic and social impact of job retention
- Living wage requirements – and living wage job availability – in a region
- Change in household savings rates
- Broadband coverage to homes rather than broadband “coverage” only on Main Street

Other practitioner exchanges have offered many more – and more targeted and intensive consultation and research would do the same.

The TRALE process also surfaced that, despite often rigid reporting requirements, some practitioners are voluntarily submitting supplemental measures to their funders that better reflect reality on the ground.

Cheryal Lee Hills of the Region Five Development Commission (R5DC) in rural Minnesota offered this approach:

“It’s important to challenge systems that have been entrenched in Congress, our state agencies, or foundation partners that say, ‘This is how you’re going to measure success.’ We’ve been taking the approach where our team will measure what the agencies or foundations want and we will measure what our communities care about. We then give the funders both – in hopes they will see that both qualitative and quantitative matter and will evolve into better measures of success.”

R5DC organizes their “what my community wants” measures around eight categories of community assets, derived from the historic “community capitals” research that is incorporated and expanded in the **WealthWorks** approach to rural development. Their [Minnesota Region 5 Development Commission WealthWorks Evaluation](#) framework can help individuals and communities set development priorities and offer clear and relevant metrics of progress. Their practice illustrates the value of using well-designed, well-researched frameworks to set priorities and measure true rural progress.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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Increasing or maintaining the balance of locally owned businesses – that’s the root of local wealth. In so many distressed rural areas, there has been this great outsourcing. The hardware stores, grocery stores, hospitals, many major employers, even the newspapers are now owned by corporations outside the community. In some cases, this has kept these services available, but the collective effect is that all this outsourcing has become like a vacuum sucking local wealth and power out of rural communities. It impacts jobs, wages, philanthropic giving, services, pride of place. In the PA Wilds we are trying to counter this by focusing on building rooted local wealth through entrepreneurship. It would be great to see more focus around local ownership and the multiplier effect it can have on rural communities.”



Ta Enos

“One of the measurements that we have used to track ourselves was [heirs’-property ownership] titles resolved, and one of our funders kept saying ‘Well, is that all you guys are doing?’ And we’re like, ‘But do you recognize how much time and energy – and how much education – we’re providing to families just to get them to that point?’ It is an education moment for the nonprofit to help [the funder] understand the complexity of the work that you are providing and try to convince them.”



Jennie Stephens

“Most Community Action Agencies] operate LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance) programs ... but who actually benefits? Yes, the families benefit because they have a portion of their light bill paid. But has anything changed? Or are they not going to need assistance in three months or four months? But who gets the cash? The utility companies. Same with these rent assistance programs, yes, we are helping to prevent massive numbers of evictions. We don’t talk about the fact that while some landlords are huge corporations, others are a small local business that may own one or two or three rental homes...and we help them prevent foreclosure on properties for which they still have mortgages or we help prevent them from having a significant decrease in their income as a result of their tenants not being able to pay their rent... [S]ome policy-makers...focus on the deficits of the families that we serve rather than recognizing where the cash is actually going.”



Terry Bearden

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“The data for Puna says that 78% of households are ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained while Employed) and in poverty. A woman from Puna told us, ‘We might be the worst when it comes to income, but we are the best when it comes to ‘ohana (family): None of us are making it on our own, and all of us are making it because of ‘ohana.’ The definition of wealth for Hawai’i Island communities is very different from what’s being presented to us as a measure of success.”



Janice Ikeda



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.

The Call to Action

For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become familiar with and accept frameworks that value community and development progress as evidenced by changes in diverse forms of capital and assets – and their preconditions. Several frameworks noted throughout this Call to Action were referenced in TRALE discussions, which demonstrates their practical power. <i>See links in text and Appendix.</i> • Push boundaries and creativity to expand the menu of measures for what can qualify as progress or effectiveness for rural initiatives funded by your program, agency, or department – or, better yet, across your government sector (local, state, or federal). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure assets and opportunities as well as needs. A distorted view of people and place happens when expectations result in bias that sees only needs or deficiencies. Fully recognizing community assets leads to a more accurate picture of rural and tribal conditions. This recognition is a precondition for establishing a respectful and productive partnership. • Design solutions to address the inherent limitations of federal data for communities and Native nations across the rural United States. The American Community Survey of the Census Bureau, a major data source for rural and tribal development practitioners, has limited utility in measuring changes in rural places.
For Philanthropy	
Everything in the For Government columns, plus:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in an ongoing dialogue with government funders about expanding and improving progress metrics for rural community and economic success. Some philanthropic funders have a more creative, flexible approach to measuring rural community change. While there are inherently different demands on public funders for accountability, a sustained dialogue between philanthropy and public funders could hold great promise to advance the field and yield better rural community progress and outcome measures. • Formalize a field of practice around innovative frameworks to measure and mark true wealth and asset building. The TRALE discussions demonstrate just a small portion of the tremendous stock of experience and knowledge across rural and Native communities. Practitioner peer-exchange – and mining it to inform better measurement typologies and practices – could be maximized through supported, systematic opportunities to link, learn, and improve practice together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support local nonprofits and governments to document qualitative methods that better illuminate ground-level success. Improved methods to standardize and deploy qualitative data for measurement can contribute to richer local and regional insights – as well as cross-place and field-wide learning, practice, and narratives. • Support training for local and regional development organizations to assess and deploy alternate data sets or community-change frameworks tailored to the priorities of local stakeholders.
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarize yourself with community and economic development frameworks for measuring multiple assets and aspects of rural development progress. Reflect and adopt what’s useful to shape productive local strategies and measurement approaches. Form regional and grassroots measurement partnerships to expand impact and grow the field. • Have confidence that you know your community. Just because you may have little access to strong quantitative data (or may not feel comfortable using it) doesn’t mean that you don’t know what counts, or that what you know doesn’t count, when compared to somebody else’s “hard data.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firmly but diplomatically push back on external funder metrics of progress and success if they don’t meet your community reality. Keep speaking the truth as you see it. Use reporting as a “funder-teachable moment” by adding local measures that you think are as (or more) important than what funders require. • Engage often and regularly with state and federal elected and appointed leaders. Invite them to your community to show them your realities; host sessions between them and your philanthropy stakeholders to ground them in your local realities. Numerous TRALE participants noted they have found it important to do this to help government and philanthropic leaders understand your reasoning behind measuring what’s important to your community.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.

Action Story 1: You Get the Multiple “Whats” You Measure



When a community targets and measures results related to the full range of its priorities, it is better positioned to make and show impact across multiple systems.

The Aspire Program, which links workforce development, local housing, and family financial counseling, was created by the Northeast Community Action Corporation (NCAC) in rural Bowling Green, Missouri, in partnership with the Missouri Department of Corrections and the joint apprenticeship program of the Carpenters Union.

Through Aspire, incarcerated individuals learn and receive certification in carpentry while they build homes inside a local correctional facility that is located in the NCAC's region.* Participants reenter the community with marketable job skills, which increases their odds for living a productive life with dignity, which reduces recidivism.

According to Carla Potts, Deputy Director for Housing Development, “Too many times prisons are trying to [train for] things that, when [individuals] come out, are not marketable skills. So [with Aspire], they'll come out with skills and with links to jobs and then they'll enter the Union to become a journeyman carpenter.”

Aspire's system connections deepen its impact in the community. The new homes are moved out of the correctional facility to provide housing stock for lower-income households in the area. The buyers receive financial fitness and homeownership counseling to qualify them for loans sourced from USDA that do not require a down payment.

“The only way I know that most people build equity is through a home,” said Potts. “A lot of people don't have that opportunity or think they can't, so these will be homes that will be less expensive, but they'll also be homes that can come back out into the community, and help with the housing stock, because we have a serious issue with housing in our communities. So, we'll measure in a number of ways, we measure training first, then jobs, and then we'll measure housing and homeownership and building equity into communities.” By focusing on those multiple indicators from the start, the Aspire effort helps leverage systems and collaboration to increase community vitality.

* Correctional facilities and prisons are often sited in rural areas because it means lower development and operating costs for the facility owner (whether public or private), because it places them out of sight and proximity to urban residents, and because they provide, in some cases, a source of steady local employment that rural areas seek.



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MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 2:

Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.

A constant theme heard from practitioners during the TRALE group discussions was that frequently funders, besides having a limited definition of success, envision estimates of what will constitute progress over a funding period that do not reflect community reality.

So, as a necessary companion to the first measurement principle, it is important that the rural community, region, or initiative do the defining, in relation to the community's context, knowledge, and objectives, of what will constitute success markers over the time period of funding. Defining tangible outcomes must fulfill a community's vision and understanding of necessary steps toward success – steps that at the same time can be understood as necessary to move toward a funder's desired longer-term impact.

This is best done in conversation, and in relationship, where local knowledge is honored, and power is shared between rural initiatives and their funding or investing partners. Only the understanding that comes from discussing the reality that each party – both the rural effort and the funder – is facing will lead to the kind of flexibility that rural communities need to make holistic progress, and that funders need to change their own systems to keep them from locking rural communities, especially disadvantaged rural places, out of the opportunity for critical funding and investment.

Models show this can work. As **Joe Short** of the Northern Forest Center reported:

“Our most productive funder and investor relationships are where we are mutually focused on the outcomes that we’ve defined in terms of community well-being, and where there’s flexibility in terms of the outputs that they’re looking for along the way.”

Rural practitioners also advise extending the application of this principle to a funder's reporting requirements. Funders often require extensive extraneous data for reports that are time-consuming, extractive, and inhibit grantee effectiveness. For rural organizations, this can become an administrative burden. Even when they have only one demanding funder, short-staffed rural organizations can find that reporting requirements eat up a disproportionate – and unanticipated – amount of their budget. This is compounded for larger rural initiatives with numerous funding sources when their varying funders for the same initiative require different measurement or data reporting using different indicators and different systems.

The question for both parties to answer together is: What really matters to measure, now, at this moment of action?

The question for both parties to answer together is: What really matters to measure, now, at this moment of action? Many foundations are becoming more sensitive to “walking with” rural initiatives to negotiate what success over the course of a grant or investment will look like and how to measure it; some even logically check in to mutually assess progress and make mid-course corrections on the effort's implementation and output and outcome expectations. Doing the one-on-one “retail” work of negotiating with rural initiatives is a steeper hill for state and federal government to climb, but surmounting it is essential if we are to steadily extend and deepen rural prosperity, especially in the most historically and economically challenged rural and Native nation communities.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 2:

Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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There has to be mutual respect, and I think oftentimes communities value what funders bring to the table because of the connection to the financial resources that will come along with them. But that same respect isn't always given or shown by funders who walk into a space acknowledging the [local] work. . . If you don't demand that, it doesn't happen.”



Felecia Lucky

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“It seems to me that in rural communities there may be a different quality of conversation about what matters, because of the strength and importance of our social network and our quality of life, more so than how much someone makes, or their status.”



Ajulo Othow

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“We look at a capital-absorption-capacity strategy that came out of Living Cities – the idea that there has to be a readiness for change on the ground. As a community foundation, whether we're talking about housing or forests or mental health or any thing relevant to our community, we feel our job is to ensure that there's a readiness on the ground. And so we often unpack: “How do you measure readiness, and what does that look like in each of our strategies?”



Stacy Caldwell

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It's much more likely that measurement is going to get done if you find ways for the community to assess itself and to understand what they can do to move forward. Your first thing is small wins, knowing this is iterative and a long game. The second thing is: use trusted and research-based measures that are focused on the vitality of communities and communities that have made it. What I am getting to is this idea of being unapologetically local about measurements, because if it's not improving the local place and the people doing the work, then it is super extractive.”



Heidi Khokhar



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 2:

Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.

The Call to Action

For Government

- **Work with grantees/awardees to understand their varying contexts at the front end.** Rural communities in different historical, economic, cultural, and geographic contexts can rightly value different factors as indicators of progress towards an outcome valued by a funder. Engage in a dialogue with rural and tribal development practitioners on the front end of an award or grant to understand what reality looks like on their ground and build shared consensus on desired outcomes.
- **Together, select and customize useful and realistic metrics of community progress that make local sense.** To determine required reporting requirements, negotiate and agree on indicators and measures toward mutually desired outcomes that are realistic in the local context over the funding time period. Use a broader menu of development progress indicators (see *Principle #1*) to help advance the discussion.
- **Ask for, accept, and learn from any (optional) supplemental community-driven metrics.** Encourage rural initiatives to report other measures or indicators that they think – or discover – are important. Analyze these across the portfolio to spark new thinking about measuring progress and to add to the menu of potential progress indicators.
- **Conduct constructive mid-course consultations.** Every project and initiative encounters unexpected bumps along their planned path, some that propel or slow their speed, and others that change their direction. Engage grantees and awardees at meaningful intervals to see how things are going, for the purpose of adjusting strategy and tactics, along with progress expectations.
- **Discard data reporting requirements that are not useful for project implementation, impact, and learning.** Native and rural grantees will be more productive when they can jettison extraneous, non-relevant data requirements.
- **Emphasize grant selection and monitoring criteria over data collected to control fraud and misuse.** Though they are critical to meet legal requirements and prevent corruption, over-emphasis on collecting information to gauge fraud and misuse can crowd out the data useful to understanding rural situations – and can even inhibit rural places from applying.

For Philanthropy

Everything in the For Government columns, plus:

- **Support efforts by rural initiatives, governments, and nonprofits to encourage public funders to adopt innovative, community-driven program metrics.** In addition to direct engagement with public funders, use philanthropy organization and affinity forums and convenings to open doors for rural and Native community practitioners to speak directly to public funders and policy-makers.
- **Support intermediaries to develop practical, community-driven measurement approaches and protocols.** Regional, rural, and national intermediaries can help examine ideas, experience, and practices across place and further develop community-driven measurement methods and models that would be more easily accepted by public, philanthropic, and private funders – and have more value for local rural initiatives and progress.

For Rural Practitioners

- **Advocate for and urge government and philanthropy to engage rural communities and practitioners in defining measurements toward rural prosperity – and accepting them.** Show up in legislative and program design settings where rural and Native community and economic development is being discussed. Share your stories about what progress looks like – and the importance of community voice and agency in defining meaningful and productive measures.
- **Start the negotiation.** If the funder does not do it, when possible, set up an in-person or virtual conversation with a funder during the application process or at the front end of a grant or award to negotiate and establish indicators, measures, and reporting requirements that are useful, realistic, and doable for you.
- **Report it anyway.** Even if the funder did not require or accept it, report indicators and measures that you think are truly important and indicate progress – and explain why.
- **Make some measurement noise on funder feedback and evaluation surveys.** Make sure you include specific and actionable ideas on how to change and improve measurement and reporting requirements when given any opportunity to provide public, private, and philanthropic funders with feedback.
- **Press philanthropy and field intermediaries to give you the support you need to measure better.** Talk to peers about common conditions and concerns. Collaborate to pitch ideas that funders might support to develop better measures and measurement systems and to support the work it takes for you to measure.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 2:

Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.

Action Story 2: Changing Minds: The First Order of (Changing) Business



Landowners on a tour at the DsSmith Paper Mill – Riceboro, GA



"Teas & Trees" Womens' Forestry Group Field Day

High impact outcomes can require a readjustment of mental frameworks for communities as well as funders. McIntosh SEED, located in rural Georgia but working in several southern states, has a long history of "walking with" communities to see new possibilities and grow their capacity to succeed.

High impact outcomes can require a readjustment of mental frameworks for communities as well as funders. McIntosh SEED, located in rural Georgia but working in several southern states, has a long history of "walking with" communities to see new possibilities and grow their capacity to succeed. In Mississippi, they partnered with local Black farmers to generate more income from their landholdings.

"Mindset changes have to happen first for communities to succeed," according to John Littles, McIntosh SEED's executive director. He notes that the rural Mississippi farmers were growing what they had traditionally grown, but it wasn't generating income for those growers.

"We connected the farmers with buyers and wholesale buyers, and they had a demand for a [different] specific crop. So, the farmers started growing for *that* demand.

That was an *economic* change in them: Mentally the shift was 'Well, we've always grown corn, but there's not a market for corn; buyers want carrots, or they want squash.' Internally and in their community, they are accustomed to growing what they always have; they inherited that tradition. So, it is important to measure those type of mindset changes, seeing the business side of it, not just seeing that they liked to grow what they have grown in the past."

Littles reflected on the importance of supporting communities to change their mindset about what is possible as a precondition to other desired outcomes. "How do you stop relying on local government to change something in your community when you, you are the change makers in the community? I think most importantly, there has to be ongoing support for that and getting them in a space where they're comfortable."



3

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal "success" standard.

Every community has distinctive assets. And in each community, each asset is in different shape, depending on its quantity and quality.

For example, two rural communities may have the same access to plentiful water, but that water may be safe to drink in one but not the other. Or two communities may have similar population and job numbers, but in one there are deep pockets of poverty and wide wealth divides, and in the other, most people enjoy a middle-class living. Or one region may have a very capable, collaborative, multi-community development organization with a good track record, while another has only small, siloed, under-resourced jurisdictions and nonprofits struggling to stay afloat.

In short, each rural community project has a unique starting point that depends not just on the project design and implementer, but on what is true about conditions in the community. Taken together, the capacity of the organization(s) implementing the project and the status of the conditions in the rural community or region constitute a rural development effort's "starting point." That starting point is neither good nor bad in and of itself... it just **is**. And progress on any rural development effort is most fairly measured from – and relative to – that starting point. While this may seem obvious, it is neither common practice nor common thinking. And it presents special challenges for rural places that affect both how development success is measured and the likelihood of gaining financial support from public and private investors in the first place. Why?

- **Going for raw numbers.** Many funders, whether public, philanthropic, or private, want their investments to tally up to something large on their results dashboard. That most easily shows up as large raw numbers – thousands of jobs created or families helped, or millions in loans made. When this is the case, the design of and qualifications for funding opportunities may either preference projects that can produce large raw numbers or disqualify those that don't (or can't) from even applying. This constitutes an automatic "place" bias against rural communities which are, by definition, smaller and not able to produce large numbers, no matter their stage of development.
- **Defining scale as raw numbers rather than ratios.** The drive for "large numbers as impact" ignores real impact, which is measurement relative to the starting point. For example, the creation of 1,000 new jobs in a city with 100,000 working-age adults is a smaller percent impact from its starting point (0.1%) than the creation of 100 new jobs in a rural place with 5,000 working-age adults (2%). Yet, generally, the former is more applauded and rewarded than the latter. No matter the asset being measured, understanding and documenting the baseline from which results are being measured is essential to defining impact, and impact is better measured as change relative to that starting point.
- **Bypassing the multitude of struggling "early-stage-of-development starting point" communities in rural America.** Knowledge is on the rise – because rural communities are raising their voices – that the vast majority of the nation's persistent poverty counties are rural, and a majority of those counties are home to a majority population of people of color or immigrants. In addition, concentrated pockets of long-term poverty persist even in well-to-do rural counties. Decades of underinvestment and discrimination based on geography, class, and race have resulted in low-resourced organizational capacity in many of these financially poorer rural and Native nation places; thus, many are now in an early-stage-of-development situation, working on improving the preconditions necessary before they can pursue and achieve "standard" development success measures. Investing in these rural places takes a non-standardized approach. Again, in part because development success too rarely is defined or valued as progress on these preconditions, poorer rural places gain less access to resources and to making meaningful progress.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal “success” standard.

As TRALE participant **Ines Polonius**, CEO of Communities Unlimited, noted:

“Community-centered measurement! Measure a community’s progress against itself, not against an elusive set of data points from somewhere else. And make the measures relative to the size of the community. [Even when] we do end up measuring jobs ... in comparison to what? I’ve had folks say, ‘Who cares that you created 53 jobs?’ The community cares that we added three percent to the total number of jobs in that community! I think that if you took those relative measures and put them in an urban environment, they would gather more attention...right? So how do we do a better job of measuring like that?”

When more communities assess and articulate progress from their own starting points, and funders begin to understand that and value success from varying starting points, more progress can be made in rural places toward longer-term development success, especially in lower-wealth rural places and populations.

Of course, one key conundrum this presents for funders is how to measure, aggregate, and report progress or success across many rural places with many different starting points that are using many different asset measures. One way to approach this would be to adapt the [Whole Family Approach Life Scale](#) (formerly called the Crisis to Thriving Scale), originally developed by the rural Garrett County Community Action Committee, which other Community Action Agencies (CAA) across the country are now using to help striving families set goals and measure progress based on each family’s starting point situation. This scale asks each family to self-report their current situation on multiple dimensions – financial security, education, health, housing, credit, social network, etc. – choosing from one of five stages (crisis, vulnerable, safe, stable, and thriving) for each dimension. Using this scale, each family defines their own starting point and chooses their own priorities over, for example, the next six months or year, and they can mark progress on a clear set of indicators. The CAA programs using this scale can then aggregate by reporting how many families made progress on their goals overall, and on specific goals, while also collecting information on which dimensions need the most attention – which helps the CAA design and tailor their services to meet local needs. Conceivably, a similar scale could be developed for different asset dimensions for rural communities, regions, or initiatives that would allow funders to aggregate progress and impact across place, despite not every place working on or measuring exactly the same thing.





MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal “success” standard.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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I was a government funder for eight years in rural New Mexico, and I walked into communities thinking, ‘The poverty rate was X,’ or ‘This was the income level to get [to in] this program.’ And if I could have walked into a community knowing what that community felt was low income, or how to measure how they felt they were at, or their level of satisfaction with their economic situation, that would [have been] so much better. ”



Terry Brunner

“

There’s such a lack of understanding that it’s going to be different for each community. A few years back, I was approached by a local entity that does community-based projects all over the world, but [not] necessarily in their own backyard. They wanted to do a project somewhere in one of the Native communities here in South Dakota – and it needed to be an economic development project. And I was so excited. We met for coffee and I shared an entire set of project ideas focused on Native artists. For context, 79% of our home-based businesses are arts-based, and roughly 51% of our people rely on a home-based business for income; that breaks down to about 40% of people relying specifically on art for income. They responded: ‘I think you misunderstood, we’re looking to do an economic development project.’ I thought, ‘Focusing on something that impacts income for 40% of the population isn’t economic development???’”



Cecily Englehart

“

How you perceive is how you proceed. I believe this and I witness misperceptions about Native America all the time. These misperceptions limit our opportunities and we use a lot of resources to break down these misperceptions just to get to a starting point with funders.”



Lakota Vogel



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal “success” standard.

The Call to Action

For Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measure progress from community starting points, not predetermined program or agency ideals of success. What is achievable in any effort is dependent to a great extent on conditions, resources, and capacity at the start of any initiative. Respect the communities you work with by having them define their own starting points across critical dimensions. • Be clear on the difference between measuring progress and measuring success. Setting and achieving realistic expectations for what short-term progress looks like from community-defined starting points will likely spur additional effort and progress toward longer-term prosperity outcome “success.” • Take into account the time variable in setting progress expectations. Discuss with practitioners and initiatives what their realistic progress indicators and change expectations are over the period of the grant, award, or loan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gauge rural progress as ratios in relation to the starting point in order to determine true impact. This is not only the right thing to do; it will allow for fairer comparisons with urban efforts. It will also help notice and learn from innovative rural efforts that are often overlooked or ignored because of low raw-number-results potential. • Check for – and work to eliminate – program-design bias against initiatives starting at different stages of development. Evaluate department or agency procedures and standards for assessing community conditions, assets, and capacity. Assess whether program requirements keep initiatives in rural places that are at earlier stages of development – especially in distressed and historically disadvantaged situations – from applying or participating. Consider designing programs in tiers that make resources available for efforts at varying starting stages of development. • Convene and collaborate – across government, private philanthropy, and rural development practitioners – to build consensus on frameworks and methods for defining community starting points.
For Philanthropy	
Everything in the For Government columns, plus:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and test innovative methods to assess starting-point baselines as well as conditions that signify progress at different stages of development. Partner with intermediaries, grantees, government, or others to create practical and useful “stage of development” scales – like the <i>Crisis to Thriving</i> scale referenced several times in this Call to Action – that help rural initiatives both identify their starting point on multiple community and organization dimensions and set objectives for progress on priority dimensions over a set time period. 	
For Rural Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your own starting line. Develop a list of dimensions or factors that you think are important in describing the status of your community or region. Compile quantitative and qualitative data that describe where you are in relation to each factor. Use that to help your local stakeholders as well as funders understand your starting point – and as a baseline from which you can establish and gauge progress. • Be a champion for your own starting line – and what progress looks like from that starting line. Trust that you know your community. Color “outside the starting-line borders” that are set by others to articulate what progress will be for your effort at your stage of development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report your impact as progress from your starting point. Employ ratios or percentage gains or changes in relation to your starting point in order to accurately portray impact on your local community, population, or economy. Do this whether or not it is requested. • Carry out regular re-assessments to gauge progress and to assure that clients and communities are speaking clearly about local conditions, assets, and priorities. There are always new things to learn about and be surprised by in your community.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort's starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal “success” standard.

Action Story 3: Centering the Start... to Finish



A member of Aroostook County Action Program’s Housing Team presents a decorative sign to a customer to welcome her into her new mobile home. The unit replaced a pre-1970’s era mobile home that was no longer safe or energy efficient to live in, and was funded through a Maine Housing Program administered in Aroostook County by ACAP.



Children in ACAP’s Early Care and Education Program plant vegetable seeds as part of a special nutrition program supported through both the SNAP-ED and 5-2-1-0 Let’s Go Programs, also administered by the Community Action Agency.

Committing to priorities set by the people or places that a program aspires to help can be a critical step for project integrity and defining true success.

Committing to priorities set by the people or places that a program aspires to help can be a critical step for project integrity and defining true success. Adopting the *Crisis to Thriving Framework* for holistic family development was a four-and-a-half-year journey for Aroostook County Action Program (ACAP) in Maine – a journey that brought dramatic transformation not only for striving local families but for the organizations that embraced the framework.

The [ACAP Crisis to Thriving Framework](#) includes 19 different domains that are critical ingredients in moving whole families into stable and then thriving conditions (e.g., food security, housing situation, school readiness, financial management, transportation, childcare). Families select *their* priorities, indicate their current circumstances, and then, with supportive coaching, move through milestones from *crisis*, to *vulnerable*, and then onward to *safe*, then *stable*, and, finally, *thriving* status. By choosing what’s important to them – that is, choosing their own starting point and what they want to work on first – families are motivated to invest in the work that they know will measurably improve their lives.

Jason Parent, executive director and CEO of ACAP, said of adopting the framework, “We were definitely swimming upstream because you’re not necessarily doing it with the initial blessings of funding sources. You’re having to prove that this is an opportunity.” The hard work of organizing family engagement and measurement around the framework in the early years paid off during the pandemic. Parent described the impact: “I cannot imagine how our agency would have served our community if this pandemic had happened before we began this transformation, and before we began to look at how we work collectively across the organization and tap into all resources and truly put our customers at the center of the work that we do. I’ve seen the difference that it’s made in the lives of the families that we serve, but I also see the difference it’s made in the staff doing the work. Our staff should be wiped out, exhausted from the additional efforts that we’re doing with the pandemic right now, but they’re feeling that they’re making that difference in that measurable success in families’ lives.” Starting with a strong targeted framework that places the intended beneficiaries at the center of defining what progress looks like benefits everyone.



4

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

Just as in urban America, rural communities and regions are deeply concerned with strengthening the social and economic “middle class,” which has been in decline in recent decades as wealth inequality has widened and contributed to civic, cultural, health, and power divides.

In rural areas, discriminatory practices based on place factors (size and remoteness) combine and overlap with class and race (and often gender) factors. Historical place, class, and race discriminatory practices and outcomes have shaped the conditions in many of today’s most challenged rural and Native nation communities, increasing gulfs both within rural regions and between rural and urban areas.

**CLASS**

Declines and changes in key industry sectors such as mining and manufacturing have gutted the economic engines of many rural regions that once provided living-wage jobs for families across generations, often with good benefits and without requiring a college degree. The disappearance of many of these jobs – and their replacement with minimum (or less) wage jobs lacking benefits – has created or deepened poverty in many rural places, even for people working full-time (or more). At present, 85 percent of the 353 “persistent poverty” counties in the United States are rural² – evidence of a deep class divide between rural and urban/suburban America overall. At the same time, many rural areas with natural resource amenities have been attracting high-wealth families who have bought second homes or who, spurred by the work-from-anywhere COVID aftermath, are moving to rural areas full time for quality of life. This influx of “have” newcomers has driven up the cost of living for the long-time rural residents who were already struggling, and has amplified the economic, social, and power distance between local haves and have-nots within rural places. Tax structures like mortgage interest deductions that preference the already wealthy, the design of key social programs that hinder mobility for the poor due to benefit cliffs or justice system strictures, disaster recovery systems that distribute resources to the better-off communities first – all of these deepen wealth inequality in rural America.

² A county is defined by the Economic Research Service of USDA as being in persistent poverty when 20 percent or more of its population has lived at or below the Federal poverty line during four consecutive U.S. Census measurements dating to 1980. The numbers here are drawn from [Rural America at a Glance 2021](#) Edition based on U.S. Census measurements using the 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses and the 2007–11 American Community Survey 5-year estimates; the 2020 Census figures were not yet finalized.

**MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:**

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

PLACE

Place discrimination also affects rural. It is a function of dismissing small community size and geographic location or isolation, and of the cultural and demographic dominance of a nation's population that is now 86 percent metropolitan (2020 Census). This domination is commercial, cultural, and often dismissive of the "flyover country" that is the primary source of food, materials, energy, water, and other resources on which the entire nation depends.

This can make a dramatic difference in access to resources. Place discrimination shows up in the qualifications and details required when applying for public, private, or philanthropic support or investment. For example, as described earlier, some funders require a population size or level of "raw number" expected outcomes not achievable in rural places, essentially locking rural applicants out; others require complex application and reporting information that low-resourced rural places and organizations with few staff or only volunteers struggle to manage. As a result, rural places, especially those most disadvantaged, "disappear" from the radar screen of funders and service providers. As a result, in the nation's low-density rural places, for example, health care is more expensive, fire departments are staffed completely by aging volunteers, and internet access is too often absent, substandard, or unaffordable.

RACE

Race as a structural force and driver of historic and current economic and social inequity is increasingly understood and acknowledged. But most people in the United States still think that "race" is an urban issue. Too few grasp that one in four rural people are people of color, and that they, along with immigrants from many nations, now account for the bulk of rural population stabilization or growth. And the connection of race to place and class in rural areas cannot be overlooked: Outside of central Appalachia, the vast majority of the rural persistent poverty counties noted above are overwhelmingly communities of color: Black, Latinx, Native, and many immigrant people. Overall, rural populations of color suffer higher poverty rates than their urban counterparts. In short, for rural and Native communities, place and class discriminatory practices have only deepened the historic grip and impact of racial discrimination on economic, health, and social inequality.

What does this have to do with measuring rural success?

First, from a process standpoint, it calls for policy and investment designers to compare the place, class, and race profile of the places and initiatives they support versus the ones they miss; to analyze if it may be due to preferences embedded in their scoring or criteria for funding; and to conduct special design for and outreach to the "unreached rural" in every region, race, and class.

Second, to change decisions and design, it calls for rural communities and organizations themselves, as well as foundations, government, and private grantmakers and investors, to diversify (and measure) the composition of their decision-making groups to include rural leaders, rural low-wealth people and communities, and rural Black, Native, Hispanic, and immigrant people – as a critical step toward dismantling practices that have created and deepened wealth and social inequality within rural and between rural and urban places and populations.

**MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:**

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

As one TRALE participant, **John Cooper, Jr.** of Texas A&M's Institute for Sustainable Communities put it:

“The outcome is the quality of the strategies, but it’s also the quality of the process, so there’s procedural equity in everything we do. We want to make sure that the teams that we put together to work on plans are representative of the places we’re working. So, we want the movers and shakers, but we also want the moved and the shaken, right? The people who stand to be most impacted by the work we do – we come to them as co-learners, as partners, and we see them as leadership assets in the places that we work.”

Lastly, it calls for consistently measuring decreases in inequity – across race, place, and class, both within our rural communities and Native nations, and between rural and urban places and populations – as a standard outcome that indicates progress toward rural prosperity. Measuring equity requires **absolute** measurement (the aggregate increase in financial wealth, for example) and **relative** measurement, such as change in the gap between Black and white median household income or high-wealth and low-wealth households in a rural place, or between rural and urban in a region or state. Decreases in these economic, social, and cultural divides are essential to strengthen both rural and national prosperity.





MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

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It's really important that jobs are year-round with wages and benefits that support a family within the cost structure of the community we live in. I don't think that's always captured in the economic reports, nor in the criteria shaping federal programs. Too often these focus on appreciation of household wealth or income, not locally generated wages, and this appreciation is often driven by a lot of other revenue. This is creating real distortions – and much greater inequality – in our community between the year-round residents who live and work here and other residents who have only recently bought homes.”



Nils Christoffersen

“

“To us, rural is a culture, and when we define it as a culture and make it a topic around equity, I think it's harder to marginalize rural people in rural places. [A] huge part is just ensuring that people understand who we are and that we have representation in those different buckets – to not only see our successes and see our wins, but to understand how to digest our data and make it a story that's positive and not weaponize it against us.”



Justin Burch

“The Latinx community is 85% of the county population, unemployment can be as high as 30%, and some of the challenges that we have around health and environmental conditions are due to the toxic seabed that we have here that has been collecting fertilizers and pesticides from agriculture. We have a booming agricultural industry, but now that the Salton Sea is drying up, it has exacerbated the existing health challenges in the county – one in five children have asthma, and we're number one in the U.S. for diabetes deaths. We are working with the smaller communities that are adjacent to the Salton Sea... helping them have a stronger voice and visibility, because basically they feel they have no voice.”



Roque Barros

“In the WealthWorks model, we know that the ‘who’ matters, and that livelihoods and ownership matter. So, are we measuring the number of employee-owned enterprises in the region versus just businesses? Yes! We measure the number of social advocacy agencies in a region that helped create social capital and build social capital and cultural capital based upon NAICS codes. Instead of earnings, we measure wage gaps. Gender wage gaps, racial wage gaps – how about we measure that instead of just the amount that people are making?”



Cheryal Hills

“

Any time we define what success is for somebody else – I find that problematic. So one of the things that I'm impressed with, coming from the state government into a Community Action Agency, is that a good portion of the Agency Board of Directors is made up of the clients who we serve. This enables us to empower them and place them in decision-making positions. I believe that is important.”



Douglas Beard



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

The Call to Action

For Government

- **Measure yourself first. Assess the distribution of grants and investments.** Regularly analyze and compare the economic, place, and race demographics of where your funding or lending is going – and is *not* going. If there is an uneven distribution to some rural areas or populations, evaluate reasons why. The “left-out” rural areas, organizations, and businesses that do not compete successfully for funding, or that do not apply at all because of the complexity, often tend to be poorer, more populated by people of color, and smaller and more remote. They can easily fall off the radar screen of program designers.³
- **Check for equity bias in application procedures and funding requirements and expectations.** If the analysis shows certain types of rural areas or cohorts are not accessing development resources, innovate your program design to reach the “left-out” rural. Larger government, philanthropy, and lending institutions tend to be located in urban places, with a preponderance of urban staff. Some may have embedded unintentional bias against rural places – for example, by justifying investment decisions based on a “return-on-investment” calculation that favors larger absolute returns over relative impact, or by looking for applying organizations of a certain staff size or track record that is not typical in rural or low-wealth areas. Consult and partner with the “left-out” rural communities and organizations and design programming that will meet their aspirations at their stage of development.
- **Ask for equity process indicators and measures.** Effective planning to reduce inequity requires seats at the table not just for the movers and shakers but also for the moved and shaken. A process that includes broad rural place, class, race, and cultural representation in designing a funding or lending program is itself a key process indicator – and one that requires attention and commitment. Likewise, ask all rural initiatives that you support to value and measure that same inclusion in the design of their efforts.
- **Ask grantees and awardees to measure changes in inequity.** Increasing prosperity for more people and reestablishing a strong middle class must be accompanied by decreases in economic, race, and place divides – in relation to wealth, health, housing, civic engagement, and decision-making voice and influence, among other factors. This is true in both relatively thriving or barely surviving rural communities. Funders have the leverage to value the reduction of locally significant inequities as a criterion for funding, and can ask grantees and awardees to measure it as a key indicator of progress.
- **For disaster-related funding,** seek ways to measure that the most vulnerable rural populations and rural areas with the least capacity have prevention and preparedness procedures in place in advance, and are addressed at the same time as (or before) well-to-do areas during remediation.

For Philanthropy

Everything in the For Government columns, plus:

- **Support the creation and maintenance of national, regional, or local civic leadership diversity databases.** Where elected and appointed representation does not reflect the community demographics, inequity is more likely to prevail. Rural people may be underrepresented on statewide and national bodies. At the same time, in rural places and rural-urban regions themselves, people of color, youth, women, immigrants, and low-wealth people may be underrepresented, even in rural communities where those may be increasing populations. Supporting the creation and upkeep of databases will help establish local, regional, and national baselines, which will make it easier to measure progress in power and decision-making equity.
- **Support methods and pilots for analyzing and measuring equity in rural places.** Taking on how to measure decreases or increases in equity in rural places can be difficult for low-resourced rural initiatives, especially those that have never done it before. Producing a few doable models would facilitate that measuring – and bring attention to its importance.

³ See a recent revelatory study conducted by New Jersey Health Initiatives on uncovering “invisible” communities and redesigning to reach them: Bob Atkins. “Grant Makers Can Advance Equity by Revealing ‘Invisible’ Communities.” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. January 4, 2022. https://www.philanthropy.com/article/grant-makers-can-advance-equity-by-revealing-invisible-communities?utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_3477734_nl_Philanthropy-Today_date_20220104&cid=pt&source=&sourceid=&cid2=gen_login_refresh



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:

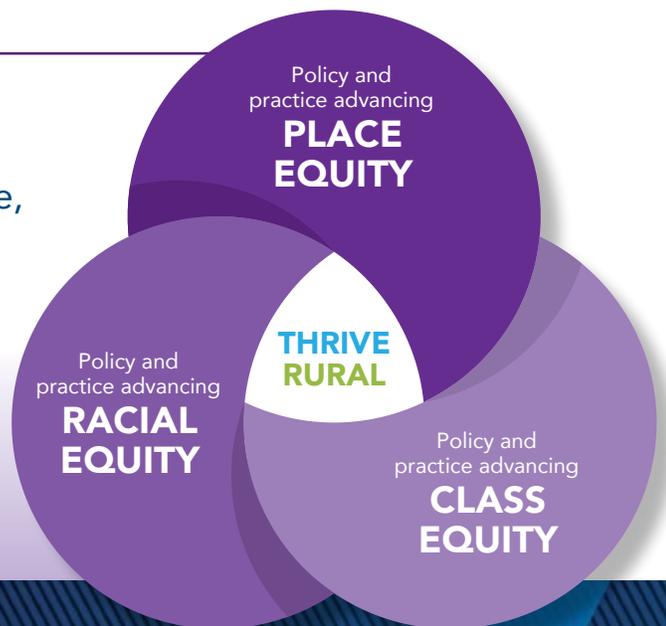
Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

The Call to Action

For Rural Practitioners

- **Know your local equity baseline.** Estimate what the particular equity – or inequity – conditions and challenges are in your place and community. In relation to class, race, place, gender, age, or other factors, how does the current status of different assets or conditions in your place compare to the population demographics in your community, or how does your community compare to the region, the state, or the country? If it is different, how so? Where do you have the most work to do, and how would you measure progress from your current starting point?
- **Ask the “reducing/increasing equity” question whenever you design a project or initiative.** Typically, when you think about it at the start of a project, you can design and implement almost any project or initiative in a way that increases equity, or in a way that either worsens or maintains inequity. If you ask at the start, “How can we do this in a way that also increases fair opportunity and equity?,” you are more likely to do so – especially if you choose a goal and an indicator (e.g., the majority of our weatherization rehabs will be in Native family housing; or our advisory committee will include people from all four quadrants of the town and every age cohort).
- **Evaluate equity conditions within your own organizations.** Recognize, have a dialogue, and act on embedded conditions that inhibit diversity, equity, and participation in your staffing, volunteers, and decision-making.
- **Work toward diversity in local decision-making positions.** Where elected or appointed representation does not reflect the demographics – locally or statewide or in your region, whether in elected offices, agency appointments, boards, commissions, or town festival committees – cultivate and advocate for more inclusive civic leadership. Document changes in this leadership over time so that the community can see progress or movement of any kind.

Learn more about dismantling discriminatory practices that affect rural people, places and economies rural with the **Thrive Rural Framework**. This new tool outlines the building blocks needed to achieve rural prosperity. It addresses the unique types of systemic discrimination due to **race, place, and class** that people in rural communities and Native Nations face.



**MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:**

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that help reduce the divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.

Action Story 4: The Value of Access and Participation for Equity

Moving toward equity requires shifting – and measuring shifts in – race, place, and class divides, including in terms of access to systems.



Center for Heirs' Property Preservation client Reverend John Wiggins imagines the possibilities in a sea of pine seedlings.

Jennie Stephens, executive director of the Center for Heirs' Property Preservation in South Carolina, tells what happens when expanding (and measuring) access is a priority: "Forestry is a \$21 billion industry in South Carolina, but there are very few people of color that are either working or connected to the industry. What we were able to do was to create a system that allowed people of color to access the forest industry. It was a public-private partnership, so you have the nonprofit who's the trusted organization in the community, who then invited in funders or representatives of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). We know about USDA and people of color; it's not been a good relationship in the past. And so the ability to create a system so that people of color would learn about forestry, know the resources, know that there was a forestry association, or know that there were funds available from USDA, increased the number of local people of color who are now engaging in forestry enterprises."

The work has had numerous – and measurable, though not always counted – equity outcomes beyond the family wealth-building and environmental stewardship benefits, according to Stephens. "My board chair, who is a participant in our sustainable forestry program and is a retired principal, just sent me a video in which the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (RCS) recorded and used her as their spokesperson. We have landowners who are serving on national committees for forestry, or in our state. So, the fact is that, yes, they're generating more money because income is important. But there are also those intangibles where they're able to be invited to tables that they would not normally be invited to sit around because (1) they didn't know the table exists, and (2) the people who were already at the table didn't know how to access them." Measuring the increase in access to and influence in systems that generate wealth and prosperity is as important as measuring any resulting wealth itself.



5

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 5:

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

The proverb goes: *If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.* To make significant progress on rural community and economic development and health issues, it is likely that you can only ever get “there” if you go together. In essence, going it alone is rarely even an option.

When a big challenge or opportunity arises (or persists), a rural organization can only do so much all by itself. Likewise, an individual rural community can rarely make solo progress on an issue or opportunity when it really affects an entire region – as does, for example, the potential opening or closing of a significant area business, the availability of hospital and medical services, road quality, internet coverage and standards, or the presence and affordability of childcare slots. The impact of any of those is important to multiple communities and populations in a rural region, so addressing it must call on their multiple assets and abilities for effective action.

Collaboration across organization and place requires a sturdy organizational framework for acting together. Partly due to greater density and proximity, these tend to be more natural or common in metro than in rural areas – for example, metropolitan transportation authorities, regional business associations, active councils of government, or metro education and workforce consortiums. In rural places, neighboring jurisdictions are further apart, the tax base that might be tapped to work together is small or nonexistent, and large institutions that might pull together or anchor regional cross-sector collaboration – like universities, hospitals, or major foundations – are scarcer. There is no government of the region, no shared financial resource base to invest together, no one with the responsibility to analyze the geographic range of an issue, bring people together, and make decisions for action.

TRALE participants underlined that rural community and economic development actors essentially have to make the case for the importance of these functions – and then invent how they are organized and where they sit; otherwise, individual organizations or communities in a rural region may end up working at cross purposes or simply not have the capacity or resources to make enough difference. Where they do succeed, they take on the qualities of a [Rural Development Hub](#), a role played by different types of organizations in different rural places (e.g., community action agencies, community foundations, community development financial institutions, colleges, free-standing regional non-profits, chambers of commerce, among others). Regional councils of government or economic development districts, which draw support from member municipalities, the U.S. Economic Development Administration, and some states, can also foster regional collaboration and action.

In short, when it comes to advancing economic and community development, rural efforts typically have greater impact when they involve networking and working together across organization and place. Collaboration is particularly critical across low population density and lower-wealth regions in order to leverage resources and build critical mass for project implementation.

However, effective collaboration typically takes more time and effort than going it alone. In rural, collaboration multiplies in complexity due to distance, fewer organizations or local governments with sufficient paid staff whose jobs can support it, and things as “simple” as poor internet connectivity. Practitioners in the TRALE made this point repeatedly: Collaboration is critical to progress and it is rarely supported financially.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 5:

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

Yet, as **Ta Enos**, CEO of Pennsylvania Wilds, put it, the effort to collaborate can make the most difference over time in advancing toward better rural futures in a region:

“The partnerships we’ve built across municipal boundaries, different industries, and the public and private sector have been transformational. They’ve allowed our region to accomplish things together that we never could have alone. The importance of relationships, of building trust, of meeting with people face-to-face so they know who you are and what you’re about and that you respect them enough to listen, cannot be understated in a rural area. You have to take the time to show up, literally, or it won’t work. Partnership work is never done, and it takes real resources to do it well.”

Other key points included:

- More funders are beginning to understand the importance of collaboration, and some even now require it. But few support what it takes to do it, especially the extra effort and cost it takes in rural places.
- When a rural collaboration is supported by multiple funders, they rarely collaborate themselves to reduce the (often conflicting) paperwork and reporting burden for the rural collaborative.
- Sometimes collaboration exists only “on paper” designed to meet the funders’ definitions of collaboration; this may either (a) not be the collaboration that is needed for the particular project, or (b) be represented as a collaboration by some applicants via local endorsement letters and the like, but not play out in reality.

What does this have to do with measuring rural development progress toward success? The TRALE process suggests that effective collaboration is critical for steady progress toward wider and deeper prosperity. But “effective” requires that the collaboration must be built on relationships and trust, shared understanding and goals, broad participation and decision-making across community and population stakeholders, established methods and structures for working together, and leveraging resources – all in ways that can set the rural area up for even more progress in the future. These can be measured, as evidenced by assessments of collective impact and similar efforts. Surely there is much work to be done to facilitate and design good ways to measure aspects of collaboration. But to advance toward greater and more widespread rural prosperity, it is work that must be done.

PRACTITIONER VOICES

“Take Chicago, there’s a popular workforce collaborative and there’s been a lot of dollars that have been invested in that collaborative to get all the different stakeholder buckets working together and they have established common metrics and ways of sharing that data. We just don’t see that investment in a lot of rural places.”



Justin Burch

“Are anchor institutions collaborating at all? Are they doing things in partnership or is everyone just sort of doing their own thing? One thing that we constantly hear from communities – and where we start to see the magic actually start to happen – is when communities say, “Wow! Our local government never really had any strong connection with our schools or our business community or this sector.”



Deb Martin



[In rural America] nobody has the resources to go it alone. One of the things it takes to do better – that almost no funding streams are willing to pay for – is collaboration. They’re willing to pay for that particular project, but the glue that holds it all together is just probably the most difficult piece to find support for in rural communities.”



John Molinaro



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 5:

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

The Call to Action

For Government

- **Ask grantees and awardees, when relevant, to report what they consider to be indicators and measures of useful and strengthened collaboration.** When grantees and awardees understand that collaboration is valued by resource providers, it can bring the importance of collaboration to the local action table. Indicators can include new or reoccurring partners in an initiative, the range of capacities in a collaboration, additional resources leveraged due to critical mass, evidence of increased trust, increased reach with services, cost savings due to economies of scale, and many more. Analyze and learn from what is reported over time – share the learning and use it in ensuing program design.
- **Inventory the regional collaborations of rural grantees and awardees – and their comparative outcomes.** Both state and federal governments have programs that foster regional thinking and, at times, collaboration. For example, the federally chartered Appalachian Regional Commission, Delta Regional Authority, Northern Border Regional Commission, and Denali Commission each focus on a geographic area with significant shared economic base, natural resources, and cultural/historic factors. An analysis of their funding that has gone to multi-partner-collaborative vs. individual-organization efforts could reveal the key aspects of collaboration that make a difference (or don't) in progress and impact.

For Philanthropy

Everything in the For Government columns, plus:

- **Support the documentation and analysis of rural-focused collaborative efforts.** Seasoned rural-based practitioners as well as national rural experts note the need for well-organized and supported collaboration to make significant progress on rural development and equity. This is based on their experience and aspirations, but it is largely under-documented. Organized evidence would help. Support analysis of collaborations and identify the factors that signal less or more effective rural collaborations – among national rural-focused organizations, between national networks and local organizations, and among organizations at the local and regional level.
- **Support the identification of indicators and collection and use of data related to rural and Native nation collaborations.** Garnering the resources to collaborate is already challenging for rural initiatives; measuring collaboration and its effectiveness is a step beyond that. Facilitate dialogue, research, and learning pilots or cohorts to identify collaboration indicators and measures – and how a menu of data and measures might be standardized – to be universally helpful to organizations and collaboratives.

For Rural Practitioners

- **Identify the elements that make your close-at-hand collaborations work (or not) – along with the resulting impact.** Work with your collaborating partners and stakeholders in real time during your initiative to do regular after-action reviews to document what is working in a collaboration, the difference it makes, and what you have learned to do differently next time. For example, does spelling out responsibilities for different partners in a signed MOU make a difference in partners delivering on what they promise? Does having someone responsible for organizing meetings and agendas and monitoring deadlines make a difference? Funding for certain elements of collaboration? Making sure you have a collaborating partner that can do X or Y?
- **Assess the impact of your individual organization efforts, as compared to local, regional, and over-the-horizon collaborations.** Use what you learn to document and tell the story of the leverage and impact you have been able to achieve through collaboration relative to acting all on your own.
- **Understand your network connections and their potential for collaboration.** Over time, the links that you have in your network – both the strong and the weak ones – make a difference in what you may be able to accomplish, including through collaboration. Consult a useful guide book like [*Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change*](#) for an introduction to understanding the formation of networks and how you can begin to track and measure your connections.
- **Include indicators of collaboration and its impact in reports to funders, whether required or not.** Help public, philanthropic, and private sector funders and investors understand the importance of collaboration by reporting how you measure/ assess it and the difference it has made in your action and outcomes.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 5:

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.

Action Story 5: The Culture and Power of Building Collaborative Muscle

Vibrant Hawai'i, focuses on catalyzing collaboration – rooted in the Native Hawaiian cultural value of 'Auamo Kuleana: *To shoulder one's human rights, responsibilities, and privileges.*



Community, NGO's, and local government partnered during COVID to establish a network of 30 resilience hubs on Hawai'i Island.

Executive Director Janice Ikeda shares insight about how interdependence and resilience are intertwined, "Resilient communities are connected communities. One of the inequitable untruths that keep us siloed is the idea that to be successful, you should be good at everything. Farmers are told that they need to build capacity in grant writing and grant management, but we don't tell business leaders that they need to know how to grow our food! We must return to the old way of building resilience in communities through collaboration and relationships, where people had an excellence and a mastery in something and then connected and relied upon each other."

Vibrant Hawai'i's value for collaboration scales up in remarkable ways. When they partnered with farmers, food distribution hubs, and the local county government on a \$1.3 million USDA summer feeding program, 4,000 children were able to consume food produced locally. However, waiting six to eight weeks for USDA to reimburse the invoices submitted by the local actors was a challenge. "That's a long time for farmers to wait to get paid back for their produce," said Ikeda. "The only way we were able to pull it off is that one of our partner food distributors

agreed to wait for their payment until we all got reimbursed. If not, we would have had to forego this entire opportunity for our Island because people just don't have \$1.3 million in the bank. And these 25 farmers would not have earned \$700,000 in income."

Such collaboration, according to Ikeda, is grounded in reciprocity and the idea that everyone has abilities but needs opportunities to express them. "To measure how we are increasing human capital, we're developing digital badges and a platform that links folks across communities. Digital badges are awarded for skills and contributions that are not typically tracked or made available through traditional systems of education, but are still valuable and needed in our community, like community health worker skills, business startup, and aloha 'āina (love for the land). Our PAPA (Passion and Purpose Academy) is shifting the narrative about who is a teacher and who is a learner. We are going back to our traditional ways of being able to fluidly move between both roles at different – and all – times of your life. More importantly, PAPA challenges us to reframe who can contribute experience and expertise toward a thriving community."



6

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 6:

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.



One after another, TRALE participants talked about the importance of seeing and feeling “momentum” as real evidence of rural progress and success. Momentum can be very tangible in a community, even though the signals may seem unimportant or small to outsiders.

It can be compared to the way that the tide changes toward the underdog team in a big football or basketball game – before the underdog then goes on to win the game (or at least make it very competitive). Recognizing and celebrating the small but significant signs of momentum are critical to building community energy and confidence; momentum inspires the optimism and collaboration essential for fueling a better future.

Momentum is fuel for progress at any stage of rural development. It can begin as a mindset change – in local leaders, organizations, or any community member – that must take place to end up in action. A common example is changes in the appearance of Main Street: One business refreshes and cleans up its storefront façade, window displays and streetscape, which inspires others to do the same, which inspires more people to come back downtown. Changes in youth participation also can spark it: An effort to engage youth after school in a community-building effort leads them to volunteer for other efforts or start their own projects, creating visible change and participation. Fresh faces and energy in elected or organization leadership who replace a grown-stodgy local establishment, or schools from neighboring districts abandoning bitter rivalries to work together on key issues – these and more can signal momentum change. And that sense of “change” is the value of momentum: Something new or different happens that in essence creates a change in direction or hope that renews, refreshes, and propels more productive action.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 6:

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.

Momentum is also fundamentally important to retaining and sustaining population in rural (and urban) places over the long term. **Roque Barros**, who has spent years as a community organizer and organizing mentor across the West and is now CEO of the Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation, recognized it as what he has heard community members call “hope”:

[Community members say]: “You know, our dream was to always move out of here, but now we’re staying here, because now we have hope that we can make things different, and things will change for us.”

TRALE participants indicated that increasing youth and young adult engagement are particularly good indicators of momentum and merit special attention because they increase children’s and young adult’s belief – and local hope – that they can find a way to stay or move back one day after college or military service to raise their families. Others mentioned assessing a community’s sense of pride in itself, or a “stick-to-itive” willingness among locals to invest in a community, often without expectation of external support or reward – for example, by starting or donating to a permanent community endowment fund. And then there are those beautiful new planters on the street downtown...or the derelict building eyesore that is no more.

PRACTITIONER VOICES



“We need to track and communicate momentum that has been spurred by our investments. For property redevelopment, one of our metrics is looking at other investments in that community that we had nothing to do with directly. In Lancaster, New Hampshire, somebody else has bought a couple buildings down the street from the one we’ve been rehabilitating – to do it on their own. You can argue whether there’s causality or not, but...the market was not doing this on its own. We jumped in maybe did something crazy from the market’s perspective, but it’s creating some momentum: People are seeing what was an abandoned building turn into a beautiful building. Now we have six families living right in the heart of downtown and other things are starting to happen. We need to point to that and say ‘Look, these are catalytic investments.’ Putting some proof and some numbers to that is important because it gets to scale.”



Joe Short



Our native youth, of the ones I was able to survey on Cheyenne River, feel optimistic that they can do better than what their parents had access to. That is a direct reflection of how recently colonization happened to us. You can tell from your grandma going to [non-Native] boarding school that “I’m going to have a better access to education or better opportunity access than what my grandma did.” I think that optimism from youth could be a good measurement of success in rural America.”



Lakota Vogel



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 6:

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.

The Call to Action

For Government

- **Ask for measures of the vital signs of momentum.** In grant and loan applications or reports, ask for evidence, when present, of significant (whether small or large) signals in effort, participation, community appearance, or local perspective that may indicate a change in future direction, energy, or potential. Just by asking, funders validate the importance of momentum – and likely increase the chances that the initiative will pause for locally constructive reflection and celebration.
- **Consider momentum when making decisions and reporting impact.** Over time, analyze what is reported, to learn how momentum might best be assessed or taken into account as part of decision-making about your funding portfolio, and to understand and report its full impact. Share what you learn with rural initiatives and other funders and intermediaries.
- **But don't turn momentum into a pre-requisite or requirement.** Instead, understand its role and value – and your role in it. Recognize that simply being funded can generate momentum, especially in smaller, invisible, overlooked initiatives and communities. When it comes to rural initiatives and areas in early stages of development, especially those that have tried to get organized and off the ground fueled only by local grit, the simple fact of receiving funding can spark momentum well beyond its dollar value.

For Philanthropy

Everything in the For Government columns, plus:

- **Understand, invest in, and measure the organizational and collaborative design and capacity that is key to building community momentum.** Resource-strapped rural organizations need staff, systems, and funding to do many things. In any situation, some of those things are more likely to have a higher momentum or “community ripple” factor than others. For example, when one regional rural CDFI had funding for interns, they partnered with a local community college to have their students build websites for tourism-related businesses and organizations across the region. They could instead have used interns in-house to answer phones and emails or do some research – all good. But by producing visible and practical value for existing and potential CDFI customers, and by partnering with the local college, and by engaging youth in community business, more happened that turned the tide of hope for what became a more connected and creative tourism sector. Likewise, internal mindset changes can change momentum: Supporting breaks, sabbaticals, peer-learning reflection, and professional development for burned-out organization leaders can be critical to producing tangible momentum changes.
- **Cultivate – and measure – community momentum.** Place-rooted funders can use the indicators of momentum suggested by practitioners throughout this Call to Action, in the indicators of the [20 Clues to Rural Community Survival](#), or in the [Measuring Community Capacity Building](#) workbook, to shape an understanding of what momentum might look like in your community. Modest funding that strategically supports small mindset- and momentum-forging projects can have a big impact in the future, especially if measures of the momentum-outcome of those investments are brought to light. (Could there be a “community momentum dashboard”?)
- **Commission surveys and analysis of rural and Native youth priorities and hopes.** Youth and young adult perceptions of their communities are key indicators of community futures. Surveys and analysis can spark action critical to building momentum and commitment to the future. Besides surveys, support academic and nonprofit analysis of disconnected youth conditions and impact. The Measure of America Youth Disconnection Series report, [A Decade Undone, a 2021 Update](#), lays a good groundwork for deeper analysis at the state and rural regional levels and with Native nations.

For Rural Practitioners

- **See “Cultivate – and measure – community momentum” in the For Philanthropy section for ideas.** Would creating a “community momentum dashboard” be helpful in your place to change mindsets and spark more hope?
- **Document and report the micro-victories that signal momentum.** The fact that an action is “small” doesn't mean it is insignificant. The emerging signs of changes in mindset, a civic springtime, or a new or renewed activity in town can be harbingers for much more to come. Report such signs of momentum to funders and outside decision-makers like legislators and state agencies – show how your love of place or local energy and commitment is just as real and significant as “hard” outcomes of new jobs or buildings.
- **Proclaim your small-but-real momentum victories to your own community and region.** They create new community narratives, which can add up to leveraging bigger goals and partners for collaboration. It is important that you declare and make known small local-momentum victories; no one else will do it for you.
- **Regularly survey or consult with your community youth and young adults.** They often have a clear-eyed assessment of their hometowns and what could make it better, including things that have become invisible to adults. Their optimism about what could make things better in the future – and their energy to contribute – can be contagious. Surveys done over time can show trends and be one reportable indicator of changes in pride, hope, and momentum – and lead to action ideas.



MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 6:

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.

Action Story 6: The Power of Momentum to Power Greater Good

When communities set and act on their own priorities, momentum builds and leans forward. This was in action when Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national advocate for public space of all kinds, partnered with community members in South Wenatchee, Washington, a small town in the heart of the largest tree-fruit-growing region of the nation.



In 2014, TPL approached the South Wenatchee community, whose population is 67 percent Hispanic,⁴ with the idea of restoring very small parks to provide better quality public space where it was needed. Community leaders, however, also wanted better civic representation, safer streets, and access to health care. Residents advocated for hiring community organizers; TPL agreed and underwrote that with a grant in 2015.

“It was a challenge for TPL to embed community priorities in the redevelopment of a one-acre park. It was in a community that had gotten a lot of empty promises from others,” said TPL’s Cary Simmons. After organizers listened and stayed present in the community, a strategic principle emerged: *Start with a small lens that can become a bigger lens*. TPL realized that communities create momentum by defining their own priorities and marking incremental progress. Simmons realized that this flipped the script for funder/community relations, “We funded community leaders to lead us.”

In 2018, following their engagement in redeveloping the park, local leaders in the neighborhood formed their own organization, Parque Padrinos (Park Godparents), and received a second grant from TPL. Small, incremental

change was part of the new organization’s structure: On joining, each member committed to take on a specific contribution, such as hosting an arts class or teaching reading; in the process, many discovered that their skills were relevant to the community. By the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Parque Padrinos had grown to 500 members.

The pandemic had an early presence in the State of Washington, and 80 percent of COVID cases in the Wenatchee Valley region affected the Latino community. Recognizing that they didn’t know how to address this, the regional hospital funded Parque Padrinos to lead a vaccine equity initiative. In a TPL article about the response, Teresa Bendito, a founding member of Parque Padrinos, said, “Already there is a language barrier, and the information needs to be processed in a way that the community can really grasp and put it into context.” With practical creativity, Parque Padrinos repurposed a well-known Selena tune as a handwashing song. And they went door-to-door with information. Within months, COVID infection rates in the Latino community reached parity with the general population. To mitigate the mental health impact of the lockdown, Parque Padrinos also organized safe activities to do outside.

The truly community-led and -achieved park redevelopment and reuse made visible the small but real indicators of momentum – from the park’s physical appearance to its range of usages to the creation of Parque Padrinos to their growth in membership. Over time, these accumulated into trust, credibility, capacity – and the power to do much more and have much greater impact.

⁴ <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=South%20Wenatchee,%20Washington&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P2>



Annotated List of Resources for Measuring Rural Development Progress



Version 1.0 – Released June 2022

This *Annotated List of Resources for Measuring Rural Development Progress* was developed and is maintained by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG). CSG created it in response to requests from rural community and economic development practitioners who want to share resources and ideas with each other as they work individually and collectively to improve outcomes for rural families, communities and regions.

CSG enthusiastically encourages you to alert us to other useful resources for measuring rural progress – as well as your perspective on any of the resources included in this list. If you have any perspectives or resources to offer, please email them to: CSG.Program@AspenInstitute.org

We will update the version number and release date each time we revise this list. You can always find the most current version online at: AspenCSG.org



Annotated List of Resources

THE BASICS ON THE DEFINITION OF RURAL¹

Why is this important? There are many ways to think about which places and people qualify as “rural.” In many cases, federal agencies set up specific rural definitions to establish eligibility for participating in or receiving funds from specific programs. In fact, there are dozens of definitions of “rural” used just within the federal government.

But, of those dozens, two definitions are dominant, and they generally provide the basis for other definitions:

- **Census definition of “rural”:** The United States Census Bureau defines “rural” based on population density. The Census assigns its rural designation to *population* at the sub-county level – down to individual Census tracts.
- **OMB “nonmetro” designation:** The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) designates counties (but not smaller areas) as “metropolitan” or “nonmetropolitan.” This definition is commonly used in analysis – with “nonmetropolitan” standing in for “rural” – even though the nonmetropolitan designation is only an informal equivalent to rural.

The USDA Economic Research Service notes that: “OMB ‘Nonmetro’ and Census ‘Rural’ provide different but equally useful perspectives on rural populations.” At the same time, the fact that these distinct definitions are both commonly used creates some important challenges for the field. It can be difficult to understand any analysis of rural people and places, or the implications of that analysis, without digging into which definition – or which variant of which definition – is being used. This is doubly true when it comes to comparing “facts” about rural, especially those that may conflict. For example, many “rural” people, as defined by the Census Bureau, live in “metropolitan” (commonly called urban) counties, as defined by OMB. This situation adds levels of complexity to any rural initiative that is trying to use commonly available data, either for planning or for assessing results. (For a visual illustration of the dramatic differences between commonly used rural definitions, see the [Defining Rural map](#) from the Center on Rural Innovation.)

[Read on to find where you can learn more about varying federal definitions of rural.](#)

The Census Bureau Definition of Rural

This site presents a series of interactive maps and text that describes how the Census Bureau defines rural based on population density. The Census defines “urban” populations based on specific density thresholds; any remaining population that does not meet the “urban” criteria is categorized as “rural.” The land area where the rural population is located is thus also identified as rural. This site highlights the counter-intuitive reality that the majority of America’s rural *population*, as defined by the Census Bureau, is located in counties that OMB classifies as *metropolitan*, often relatively close-in to major urban areas. It also illustrates that rural is far more than the OMB “nonmetropolitan” designation.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Follow the text on the left to learn about the current definition and the evolution of the definition over time. The maps shown on the right illustrate the text, and you can zoom in or out to states and sub-state places. Use the two other tabs on this site to find rural-related Census data and interesting facts about rural demographics.

¹ Note that much of the data referenced in this section is updated after each Decennial Census; it can take up to two years after the completion of a Census for those updates to happen, depending on the level of the data. As of the release of this Call to Action, only topline 2020 Census updates had been released.



Annotated List of Resources

USDA Economic Research Service Review of Rural Definitions

This concise review of the difference between the Census definition of rural and the OMB nonmetropolitan designation complements the Census Bureau discussion described above.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use this site to understand the multidimensional nature of rural, and how different definitions are suited for different uses. Between this site and the Census Bureau visualization above, you can gain a better understanding of a complex topic. This site also provides high-quality downloadable maps.

Percent Rural and Urban in 2010 by State and County

This Census Bureau site provides spreadsheets with detailed figures for urban and rural populations, and the land area where those populations live, in every state and county in the United States. (At the time of this writing, the data on this site is from the 2010 Decennial Census, but the Census Bureau will be updating it with the 2020 Decennial Census data.)

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Scroll down to the subsection titled *List of Population, Land Area, and Percent Urban and Rural in 2010 and Changes from 2000 to 2010*. The Excel file titled *Percent Urban and Rural in 2010 by State and County* provides total rural and urban population, their relative percentages of total population, and land area that is rural or urban. Note that the land area is given in square meters; convert to square miles by dividing the total meters by 2,589,988 (the square meters in a square mile). Also note that this dataset does not include water area in the land area totals, as some other datasets do. Once the site is updated with 2020 Census data, you will be able to use it to understand changes in rural population and land area between 2010 and 2020.

ON THE CHALLENGES OF RURAL DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Why is this important? Economic and community development practitioners in communities and Native nations across the rural United States express frustration that so much federal data is inadequate for their analysis and program design needs. (See the brief discussion of this in the *important Context* section on page 4.) The resource highlighted here gives important context for that frustration, as well as potential solutions.

In Search of Good Rural Data: Measuring Rural Prosperity

This is a well-researched report published by the [Urban Institute](#) in partnership with the [Housing Assistance Council](#) and the [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#). Its analysis describes the challenges of locating and using reliable rural data, and it makes helpful suggestions for possible solutions.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This report can help practitioners and others understand the “why and what” of rural data limitations. More importantly, it highlights a number of policy and administrative suggestions on how to increase data usability. This report is useful reading to ground rural development practitioners and policymakers in the challenges of “measuring” rural.



Annotated List of Resources

RESOURCES THAT ASSIGN RURAL TYPOLOGIES USING DATA

Why is this important? Some researchers and scientists construct typologies and categories to analyze and understand their subject. Because local rural and Native nation regions in the rural United States are diverse and complex, classification systems can be useful tools to find commonalities and differences – and useful for practitioners in peer communities and for policymakers when they design targeted program solutions.

County Typology Codes – USDA Economic Research Service

The Economic Research Service, the research arm of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), has long classified rural counties using two different typologies:

- **County Economic Types** assign each county to a category based on its dominant economic or industry activity, such as manufacturing, mining, or agriculture – categories that are mutually exclusive.
- **County Policy Types** assign each county to one or more (or none) of six “policy” types: persistent poverty, low educational attainment, low employment, population loss, persistent child poverty, or retirement destination. Note that five of these six County Policy Types describe a negative condition. Also note that unlike the County Economic Types, the Policy Type classifications are not mutually exclusive, and some counties receive no designation at all.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This site provides maps and documentation that you can use to identify economic and policy contexts for specific counties, or to analyze trends across counties.

Distressed Communities Index – Economic Innovation Group

This resource provides analysis at both county and zip code levels and is remarkable for its simplicity and clarity of presentation. Because its data can be sorted by racial composition, education, occupation, and nativity, it is a good resource for doing equity analysis. For example, the data show that in North Carolina, approximately 35 percent of the state’s African American population, as compared to 17.6 percent of the state’s total population, lives in a distressed county.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Based on seven socioeconomic indicators, this resource assigns each county and zip code to one of five typologies: Prosperous, Comfortable, Mid-tier, At Risk, or Distressed. Data can also be sorted by racial composition to show the percentage of a selected population that lives in one of the five typologies. This framework can be used to show the geographic distribution of racial or ethnic groupings, education, nativity and occupation. (Congressional district is also noted but may be more difficult to use in running an analysis.)

Fifteen County Types – American Communities Project (ACP)

This is an interesting high-altitude portrait of America that works to portray and categorize the diversity and division that exists across the country. Now based at Michigan State University School of Journalism, the American Communities Project has created 15 county classifications based on a rich array of data that attempts, in their words, “to understand the subtleties and complexities of the United States as the country reimagines its future and its place in the world.” Every county – rural and urban – is assigned to one of the classifications. ACP also produces an offshoot analysis using its classifications, in partnership with the Center on Rural Innovation, on [Deaths of Despair](#) across America.



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HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This product is most useful for seeing broad patterns and similarities across the 15 county classifications. The stories generated from the classifications can also provide useful insights, and the Deaths of Despair data can be useful in identifying health-related population conditions that may tie to both economic and social outcomes.

Reenvisioning Rural America – Urban Institute

This recently released Urban Institute product flips the script on nearly all the other typologies and classification systems. Rather than assigning places to categories based on distress indicators, this analysis uses a framework of strengths, potential, and assets – called “capitals” – to classify rural places. As they rightly note, “rural communities are much more than what they need.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Using a Community Capitals framework based on seven major “capitals” – Built, Cultural, Financial, Human, Natural, Political, and Social – this resource assigns every rural Census tract to one of seven “rural peer groups” (e.g., Centers of Wealth and Health; Diverse Outlying Tracts; and Diverse, Institution-Rich Hubs). This resource takes on an admirable but daunting challenge: constructing a data-driven framework, even though, as the authors acknowledge, there is little place-comparative data available for many of the capital types, others are difficult to quantify, and many community assets overlap. Nonetheless, this new typology might prove helpful to rural communities working to understand, define, and prioritize their own assets.

RESOURCES FOR IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF MULTIPLE INDICATORS

Why is this important? No single data point exists in a vacuum. Tools like digital “atlases” that show multiple indicators can help demonstrate connections, target interventions, and identify new ways to measure progress. These resources also help advance Measurement Principle #1 that surfaced during the TRALE process: *Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.*

Annual Rural America at a Glance – USDA Economic Research Service

This annual publication is developed and published by the [Economic Research Service of USDA](#). The *Rural America at a Glance* series has a useful-content ratio far above its relative brevity. The staff of the Economic Research Service have consistently produced high quality products that convey not just information, but usable knowledge. Every year’s edition has a timely theme for its analytic focus.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This is the resource you pull out of your back pocket or shoulder bag for current facts useful in two-minute elevator advocacy. For example, the 2021 edition offers a solid overview of rural demographic change between 2010 and 2020 and focuses on persistently poor counties, the impact to date of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural and urban places, and broadband coverage. (Enter “Rural America at a Glance” in the website’s search bar to find previous editions with other focus topics.)



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Atlas of Rural and Small Town America – USDA Economic Research Service

The Economic Research Service is the flagship federal institution that does research and analysis on rural and agricultural conditions across the nation. This data atlas does not have all the graphic punch of other sites, but its importance is that the data (which goes only to the county level) is regularly updated and rigorously reliable, which sets it apart from other data resources.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The landing page for this website provides a good overview of what can be found and how you can use it. The link to the interactive atlas is on the left. The Atlas link opens up to its default map: national population change rate. In the upper left-hand is a small drop-down menu titled “Select Map to Display” where you can select a specific data category: people, jobs, income, county classifications, or veterans – each of which provides a drop-down link to individual indicators in that category. On the right side of the map, you can select all geographies, Metropolitan, or Nonmetropolitan. Clicking on any county in the US will provide you the data on any indicator you select. Also note that, if you wish, you can download the entire database or a subset on one specific indicator or place, down to the county level.

Digital-Economy Opportunity – Center on Rural Innovation

Based in rural Vermont, the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI) provides much-needed analysis linking rural opportunity to digital innovation. CORI aims to fill gaps in access to rural data especially related to the connections between digital infrastructure and economic development, including broadband availability, rural community assets, digital workforce, and potential for tech-based business development.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. CORI’s many maps and data tools can help rural practitioners understand and communicate their communities’ status and potential in the digital economy. For example, the *Data for Action* map allows users to compare communities across 40 variables spanning demographics, housing, economy, entrepreneurship, community assets, and federal funding, and the *Scouting rural digital economy opportunities* map shows indicators like patent activity and broadband access that contribute to a digital-economy ecosystem. Other data tools include the *Tech Talent Tracker*, which generates in-depth reports on a selected county and peer counties on indicators related to developing a robust tech workforce. All charts are easily downloadable for presentations, grants, and reports. CORI’s blog is also a great resource for guidance on using data; for example, *How to tell your community’s story using data*.

Economic Profile System – Headwater Economics

The **Economic Profile System** developed by Headwaters Economics offers quick facts and immediately downloadable local-profile reports on a wide range of data for individual communities, counties, indigenous areas, or states. Besides current data, when possible, it presents change data over a longer period; seeing these long-term change trends offers a perspective that is hard to find elsewhere. Also unique is that they explain why specific indicators are important. In addition, in their Population at Risk data portrait, they highlight where data is less reliable in very rural settings. (Both practices should be standard in data presentations.)

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Users can enter the name of a community, county, indigenous area, or state, and immediately download a data report covering up to four standard subject areas: Demographic, Populations at Risk, Socioeconomic Trends, and Key Indicators. Beyond that, Headwaters also offers area reports on industry sectors that predominate in rural places (e.g., timber, tourism) and county-level reports on natural hazards as well as land management and use. Their comprehensive and detailed information makes this a go-to site. Note also that users have the option to produce a report that compares one selected geography to another. Also see Headwaters recently released [\(2022\) Rural Capacity Map and Index](#).



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Housing Plus – HAC Data Portal

For fifty years, the Housing Assistance Council (HAC) has been one of rural America's greatest partners in building and preserving decent affordable housing. HAC's data resources are significant, diverse, and can be fine-grained down to the county level. HAC's data portal has a simple, intuitive layout and includes a wide range of economic, demographic, social, housing, and housing finance data. They make an additional major contribution by providing information on USDA Rural Development Obligations. They also produce briefs and visualizations on special and timely topics, for example, COVID-19 in rural America, rural diversity, rural homelessness, Native American housing, and much more.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The HAC Data Portal has a simple but comprehensive design. A user can select a state or county, and then select a data theme: demographic, social, economic, housing, or housing finance. Once that is selected, you can choose to generate a report that has all the data for the section, or you can drill down further and choose specific data sets. Users can also produce reports to compare rural, suburban, and urban data within a specific state. Like Headwaters' Economic Profiles, another notable advantage of this data platform is that they indicate the reliability of specific data.

Income Tax Form Statistics Data – Internal Revenue Service

This is an exceptionally detailed, seldom used (or even known) source that breaks out 1040 tax form data at the zip code level. The data is available sorted by levels of adjusted gross income. The Internal Revenue Service carefully scrubs this data, and there is generally a two-year lag in releasing it. At the time of publication, the most recent data is for the 2019 tax year.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This data series goes back to 1998, so a deep longitudinal analysis of the many data points collected on income tax returns is possible. Among the 148 columns of data are, besides AGI, the salaries and wages portion of AGI, home mortgage interest paid, total charitable contributions, child and dependent care credits, earned income credits, and much more. Besides zip code, the data is also available at the County, Metropolitan and Micropolitan geographies, and by Congressional District for years 2017 through 2019.

Net Migration Patterns for U.S. Counties

Population change takes place in two ways: by natural growth and decline (the change caused by the number of children born and people who die in a geography) and by migration (the change in the number of people who choose to move into or out of a geography). This resource focuses on the latter. One indicator of community vitality is the in-migration of families, especially (but not only) those of prime child-bearing ages. Understanding the pattern of in- and out-migration is useful for targeting development priorities. This resource has been supported by different funders and analysts over its 60 years; the current project analysis was conducted by the Department of Social Sciences at Michigan Technological University, the Applied Population Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This dataset provides age-cohort breakouts for both in-migration and out-migration for every county in the nation. Users can download maps, charts, and data for any state, county, or multiple-county groupings on net migration; specify it by decade, race, or gender; and append other data to it. Users can also examine the data according to USDA ERS County Typologies (see above). This resource uses Decennial Census data and covers ten-year intervals going back to the 1950s. At this writing, its most recent data is from 2000 to 2010, however it should be updated soon with 2020 Decennial Census data to cover the 2010 to 2020 period.



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RESOURCES FOR RURAL DATA FOCUSED ON EQUITY ISSUES AND OUTCOMES

Why is this important? The fourth Measurement Principle that surfaced in the TRALE process – to measure decreases *in place, race, and class divides...as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity* – focuses on the importance of measuring equity as a rural development outcome. These resources can help advance that aim.

ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) – United for ALICE

This data initiative, pioneered by one New Jersey county's United Way more than a decade ago, is now a national effort with county-level data available nationwide. The power of ALICE is its focus on households with employed individuals who earn more than the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but less than the basic cost of living for the state – which is called the “ALICE Threshold.” ALICE provides a data-driven, reality-based counter to the conventional belief that only those below the “official” poverty line face challenges.² The ALICE methodology is simple and powerful, and its narrative-changing presentation is compelling – which explains why many rural development practitioners use it in their work.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The ALICE website provides three statistics for each state and county: (1) households in poverty as measured by FPL, (2) “ALICE” households based on the local cost of living, and (3) households living above the ALICE threshold. For example, in the most recent ALICE analysis (2020 report based on 2018 data), 10 percent of Virginia's households are in government-defined poverty, but its ALICE households tally at 29 percent; the remaining 61 percent live more comfortably above the ALICE threshold. Partnerships in 23 states have produced deeper [county and municipal-level ALICE analyses](#) published at regular intervals, including modified cost of living analyses, the “Landscape of Work,” and labor force trends especially focused on ALICE workers. If you are in a state without a deeper ALICE analysis, strike up a conversation; producing state reports typically involves a combination of local United Ways and one or more philanthropic and/or corporate partners.

Index of Deep Disadvantage

This useful analysis adroitly addresses these key questions: *What does disadvantage look like across the United States? And where is it found?* A University of Michigan/Princeton University research team incorporates three types of data in this index: health (life expectancy, low infant birth rate), poverty (rates of poverty and deep poverty), and social mobility (using [Opportunity Atlas](#) data analysis, highlighted elsewhere in this Resource List – the “social mobility” measure estimates income change across generations for very low- income households). The methodology is exceptional in that it integrates more conventional and available measures on health and poverty with the mobility measure – and does so in a way that allows for comparing places.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This composite portrait is best used as a snapshot to compare both similar (rural compared to other rural counties) and dissimilar geographies (counties to cities, and rural counties to urban counties or cities). Using this index and data can help inform strategies both to design household-level assistance and to address systemic needs in a region.

² As the ALICE website points out: “ALICE is your child care worker, the cashier at your supermarket, the gas attendant, the salesperson at your big box store, your waitress, a home health aide, an office clerk. ALICE cannot always pay the bills, has little or nothing in savings, and is forced to make tough choices such as deciding between quality child care or paying the rent. One unexpected car repair or medical bill can push these financially strapped families over the edge.”



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COVID-19 Dashboard for Rural America – The Daily Yonder

The Daily Yonder, the ground-breaking rural news and information service produced by the Center for Rural Strategies, has been publishing this COVID-19 Dashboard since early in the pandemic. There are numerous COVID-19 dashboards at the state and national level, but this effort by the Daily Yonder focuses on rural incidence and impact and is carefully constructed by knowledgeable rural data geeks. It is kept up-to-date, and the commentary with each update identifies rural-important trends from a national perspective, across the broad spectrum that is rural and Native nation America.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The data are cleanly and logically laid out in both maps and charts. The lead map presents detailed data on infection rates across the nation – and also reports pop-up data for every county as you mouse over it. The map classifications indicate cases per 100,000 people using gradations of color for both rural (nonmetro) and metro counties. Maps predominate on the dashboard, but the graphic/chart visualizations – on rural and urban vaccination and death rates over time, for example – are equally informative and powerful. Another stand-out feature of this site is the diversity of stories on how COVID challenges rural America, especially rural hospitals. It is a reminder that behind every data point there is a person, a struggle, a grief – and often an example of hope and resilience.

Economic Mobility and Equity – Opportunity Atlas

The Opportunity Atlas is a data visualization tool developed by Opportunity Insights, based at Harvard University. The Atlas is a visually powerful, interactive data platform for researchers and policy advocates to gain understanding about economic outcomes for people based on where one grew up. This site is unique in its view of equity through the lens of economic mobility later in life, showing that people who grow up in some neighborhoods and rural places experience far less economic mobility over their lifespan than those raised in other areas, and that there are clear differences in that mobility based on race, gender, and parental income as well as zip code.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This is a comprehensive resource for recognizing gaps in racial and ethnic socio-economic metrics. Navigating the site is a challenge at first, but it is well worth the investment of time to learn. Opportunity Insights has a [series of tutorial videos](#) to maximize use of the Atlas. Users can select a geography, then an indicator – for example, household income at age 35 – and then a race and gender filter. Note that data are available down to the Census tract level, but data at that level can be less available and reliable for very rural geographies. Practitioners and advocates who seek to measure and close the relative gap in socioeconomic outcomes may find this a major resource for analysis and strategy-setting.

Living Wage Calculator – MIT

This Living Wage Calculator is maintained by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The cost of living varies across the United States, and for low-wealth families with narrow financial margins, this difference matters. For advocates and policymakers, it is important to understand how the difference in wage levels can enable working families to move from just surviving toward thriving.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Although a number of living-wage calculators are available, this one is simple to use and reliably updated. You can select a state, and then either a county or metro region (data is not available below the county level). The data is arrayed in a table that provides the area's living wage, poverty wage, and minimum wage for different sized families. A second table provides typical annual costs for each family classification. This is an informative and useful data resource for understanding and communicating the situation facing low-wealth families.



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Rural and Underserved Counties List – Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

This list identifies counties that have a low volume of financial transactions for mortgages and commercial loans, based on the amount and diversity of lending activity reported by financial institutions that is required by the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA). Generated annually by CFPB, for 2022, it includes 1,608 rural counties. To facilitate their increased lending activity in the listed counties, both mortgage and commercial lenders are allowed some regulatory exemptions (a “safe harbor”).

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This dataset can inform policy makers and local development practitioners about how robust (or not) commercial lending systems are in a given county. If a rural county is listed, it might be an appropriate market for a Community Development Finance Institution to tailor lending and other assistance products to meet entrepreneurial demand, or boost access to homeownership.

Social Determinants of Health (and Equity) – County Health Rankings and Roadmaps

This resource, developed and maintained by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, provides a comprehensive data portrait that convincingly connects health outcomes to socio-economic conditions, using the internationally researched social determinants of health (SDOH). The SDOH measures assess a wide range of conditions in the places where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of life outcomes. The Health Rankings introduction says it best: “Many factors influence how well and how long we live, from our access to affordable housing or well-paying jobs to opportunities for a good education for our kids. The County Health Rankings model shows us how these factors work together and illustrates where we can take action to improve health and eliminate unjust barriers to opportunity.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The County Health Rankings site makes it easy to query for 82 community, population, and health indicators for any specific county, rural or urban. The tool also ranks every county – overall, and on each of the 82 individual indicators – compared to other counties in its state. The Rankings provide data in two categories: (1) *health factors*, which include social and economic, physical environment, health behavior, and clinical care “input” factors; and (2) *health outcomes*, which include how long people live, and how people feel in terms of their well-being. This site is worth investing time to learn and explore, and it directly connects a county’s ranking status to a *Take Action to Improve Health* tab that practitioners and advocates can use to consider potential strategies and make peer connections. The site has an [introduction to equity section](#) that is designed to prepare the user to see equity implications in the data.

Youth And Young Adults: A Decade Undone – 2021 Update

In 2019, Measure of America, a program of the Social Science Research Council, produced *A Decade Undone*, a comprehensive national report on disconnected youth — which they then updated in 2021. “Disconnected youth” — also called “opportunity youth” — are defined as individuals between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither in school nor in the workforce. They are a critical population to address and include in the development process, both for them as individuals and for community futures. Their current status is also an indicator of significant rural and urban divides. One *Measure of America* finding is that rural counties have a youth disconnection rate of 17.3 percent on average, compared to 11.2 percent in urban centers and 9.9 percent in suburbs.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The website includes both the full report — a rich resource — and an interactive site that encourages exploration of data by state, major metro region, congressional district, and county. Note that for very rural counties with small populations, data limitations prevent getting a good estimate.



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RESOURCES RELATED TO NATIVE NATION DATA AND MEASUREMENT

Why is this important? Native American rural development practitioners that participated in TRALE discussions noted that doing development in Native communities and tribal lands requires an understanding of significant factors that are distinct from those important to rural development in general. They underscored that it is important for non-Indigenous practitioners, policymakers, and resource providers to better understand Native realities if they hope to partner with Native development practitioners and practices.

About Tribes – National Congress of American Indians

This important resource from the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) Policy Research Center covers a wide range of topics – including demographics, health, tribal economies and natural resources, and public safety. The entire website for the National Congress of American Indians is a solid resource for practitioners working across rural and Native nation communities.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use the Demographics tab to quickly access a wealth of statistics on Native nations overall. Drill down to the Regional Profiles to access well-contextualized data on each of NCAI's 12 regions, including clearly presented maps, charts, and graphs. A separate PDF report is available for each region.

Data Justice Talk Story – Vibrant Hawai'i

This is an embedded video on the Vibrant Hawai'i website – also available [here](#) on YouTube. It offers a personal and powerful perspective on how cultures that have been pressed to give up agency and sovereignty perceive data collection from the outside. *“What counts as knowledge? What knowledge counts? And who decides? We do. If it is not by us, for us, and with us, then it is against us.”*

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Any community or economic development practitioner, policymaker, or funder can build understanding by watching this discussion. Use it to spark conversation and action on data justice for Native nations.

Fast Facts: Native American Youth and Indian Country – Aspen CNAY

Native nations have a higher percentage of the population that is under 18 compared to the nation as a whole. This resource provides information on Native youth demographics and equity disparities in health, education, and the criminal justice system. It is maintained by the Aspen Institute Center for Native American Youth (CNAY).

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This set of data points can provide a quick grounding of facts on Native nations and individuals overall across the country, and on the challenges facing Native youth.

Land Issues – Indian Land Tenure Foundation

Understanding the history and reality of legal and administrative systems that have inhibited Native people from owning and controlling reservation lands is one key component of understanding data and measurement difficulties in Native communities. The Indian Land Tenure Foundation works to increase Indian control and management of reservation lands through education, cultural awareness, economic opportunity, and legal reform.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. This website is a portal of information that can help those working in or partnering with Native communities. Use it to explore the history of Indian land tenure, as well as specific issues and challenges facing Native nations, including fractionated ownership, land loss, sovereignty, and more.



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Native Nation Building: It Helps Rural America Thrive – Aspen CSG

This Field Perspectives brief, authored by Native nation practitioners and researchers, and published by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, details the evidence-based characteristics of successful Native nations, focusing on five factors that distinguish the Native nations that achieve their community development goals from those that are less successful. It also explains why strengthening (and measuring) these Native nation building characteristics is also critical to making rural development progress in the regions adjacent to Native nation communities.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Use this brief to understand the role of data in equitable rural development from a Native perspective, as well as how Native nation building factors can be a foundation for rural development.

RESOURCES FOR MEASURING NETWORKS, COLLABORATION, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Why is this important? Collaboration and community capacity are notoriously difficult to measure and demonstrate, but these resources can help. Together, they advance Measurement Principle #5 that surfaced in the TRALE process: *Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.*

Data in Collective Impact: Focusing on What Matters

The Collective Impact framework for high impact collaborative initiatives was introduced in a 2011 article in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Over time, collective impact practice has generated the vibrant [Collective Impact Forum](#) managed by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. One of the five conditions necessary for collective impact is “shared measurement systems.” This resource, written by Justin Piff of Equal Measure, discusses the importance of data in collective impact: “The data we collect – and the data we don’t – reflect our values and what we think are important... Getting partners to agree on what matters—including definitions of success and how to get there – is therefore critical.”

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The resource introduces four data-related lessons from the Collective Impact field. Think of them as diagnostics you can apply to your own organization: *Prioritize the learning, not the data system, Be clear about whose lives you hope to improve, Use qualitative data, and Keep the short and long games in view.* The essay ends with suggestions for what funders can do, recommendations that echo many of the TRALE Call to Action points in this report.

Measuring Community Capacity Building

Though it dates back to 1996, this workbook never goes stale because it guides local practitioners to select and measure their own indicators. The workbook articulates the importance of capacity building – and that it takes time – as a call for why it is vital to measure it in practical, locally-determined increments so that hope, energy, and momentum can be sustained. The Workbook was a product of the Rural Community Capacity Building Learning Cluster, a cohort of 15 expert rural community capacity building practitioners convened over several years by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group. It is appropriately subtitled a “Workbook-in-Progress,” as capacity building in rural places will always be a work in progress – a gift and a challenge from one generation to the next.



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HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The workbook is organized around eight outcomes of community capacity-building: e.g., expanding diverse, inclusive citizen participation; expanding leadership base; strengthening individual skills; widely shared understanding and vision; strategic community agenda, and more. The workbook then provides an extensive menu of *potential* indicators and sub-indicators and accompanying measures for each. Any community or initiative can choose what it wants from the menus to gauge progress for each outcome, based on the community's situation and starting point, over a time period of its choosing.

Net Gains: A Handbook for Network Builders Seeking Social Change

One contention of the participants in the TRALE process is that useful (outcome-focused) collaboration at the rural local and regional levels is an important indicator of rural progress. The strength and extent of network links is a connective- tissue indicator that can be used to measure the potential for collaboration. While not a recent publication, this resource remains an excellent introduction to the power of networks and how they are nurtured; it remains a core resource for network building and nurturing collaboration.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Draw on this handbook for practical guidance on network building, including approaches to measuring and mapping different aspects or components of networks.

FRAMEWORK RESOURCES: USING DATA TO SHAPE PRIORITIES, STRATEGIES, AND OUTCOMES

Why is this important? The principles in this TRALE Call to Action make the case that when communities and individuals define their own priorities and starting points, they create a foundation for more authentically measuring progress and maximizing success. Frameworks can provide a key tool for this self-definition. These resources advance TRALE Measurement Principle #2: Do not dictate what to measure. *Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.*

20 Clues to Rural Community Survival

This succinct checklist developed by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development has been a compass of progress for small towns for many years. It remains as vital as when it was developed because it identifies enduring elements of community vitality. The Heartland Center also offers workshop training around the Clues.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. The 20 Clues is a solid discussion-generating and diagnostic tool for local rural elected, appointed, and volunteer leaders who may just be learning about the elements of community and economic development. For more experienced practitioners, it is a reminder that beneath complexity there are simple indicators that matter. To name just four of the 20: community pride, a cooperative community spirit, celebrating diverse leadership, and the conviction that, in the long run, you have to do it yourself.

Crisis to Thriving Framework – AKA Whole Family Approach Life Scale

The Crisis to Thriving framework, recently renamed the Whole Family Approach Life Scale by its originators, was designed for community action agencies and other two-generation or whole-family programs to help families set their own specific goals and measure progress. This framework is organized around a matrix of domains familiar to all families: for example, nutrition, housing, childcare, transportation, and financial management. Indicators of the current status of a family's situation are articulated as practical statements (e.g., *I am currently renting but*



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it is not affordable, or I am homeless and couch-surfing, or I own a home that needs repairs, or I am in a stable housing situation, etc.) and arrayed along a clear and practical five-status spectrum describing where the family is currently: Crisis, Vulnerable, Safe, Stable, or Thriving. Above all, it recognizes that individuals and families are most invested in solutions when they set their own quality of life priorities, and it makes it easy for families to see their progress along a spectrum.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Organizations that work with families ask them to indicate which status describes their current situation, and then ask the families to set goals for which status they want to make progress on next. This framework could be adapted for rural community and economic development self-analysis and goal-setting by defining “crisis” to “thriving” descriptors for a community or region as a whole.

Thrive Rural Framework for Equitable Rural Prosperity

The Thrive Rural Framework is a new (2022) tool to help take stock, target action, and gauge progress towards this outcome: *Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.* Developed by the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group in partnership with seasoned rural and Native community, economic development, and health experts and practitioners from across the country, this framework diagrams the essential building blocks that must be in place – ten each at the Local Level and the Systems Level – in order to advance toward that outcome. It also includes the essential Foundational Element of dismantling rural-discriminatory practices based on place, class, and race that are embedded in policy, practice, and behavior at both the Local and System Levels.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. Communities, program designers, and policymakers can use this framework in generative discussion and formal processes to assess the status of individual building blocks in rural communities and regions or in regional and national systems – and to define what progress will look like in strengthening specific building blocks that are both near-term and long-term priorities. The Framework can help conceive and pinpoint missing and relevant indicators useful for making progress and impact – and refining action – over time. (Ancillary material will be developed going forward for using the Framework.)

WealthWorks

WealthWorks is a systemic approach to strengthen rural and regional economies to “do development differently” by connecting community assets to market demand to build lasting livelihoods. WealthWorks practitioners build connected value chains of activity in any community or economic development effort that pursue three simultaneous “wealth-creation” outcomes: (1) strengthening eight different forms of capital or assets while damaging none; (2) increasing local ownership of and influence over those assets; and (3) ensuring that low-wealth people, places, and businesses are always part of the decision-making and reap benefits in the effort. When these elements are present, more wealth becomes rooted in local people, places, and firms, which sets a community or region in a stronger position for future development.

HOW YOU CAN USE THIS RESOURCE. When using the [WealthWorks approach](#) to economic development, community actors work together to identify the stock and quality of their assets in eight “capital” categories – Individual, Social, Natural, Built, Intellectual, Political, Cultural, and Financial – and how they might be deployed to strengthen a particular economic sector(s) while meeting documented demand for goods and services that the region can produce. Just as the Crisis to Thriving framework can do for families, WealthWorks can become a dynamic tool for measuring progress in a community. Note other resources on the website specifically related to measurement, for example: [Measuring Rural Wealth Creation: A Guide for Regional Development Organizations](#), produced by the National Association of Development Organizations, and a good example of using it in the [Minnesota Region 5 Development Commission WealthWorks Evaluation](#).



TRALE/Call to Action Participant List

These 46 rural practitioners and experts participated in the TRALE 1 process.

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About this Call to Action and the Thrive Rural Framework

This TRALE Call to Action. This Call to Action is the product of the first Thrive Rural Action-Learning Process (TRALE). The objective of each TRALE process is to quickly tap on-the-ground insights and experiences to help generate some breakthrough thinking about what works and what’s needed to push policy and practice toward increasing well-being for more people and places in rural communities and rural Native nation places across the country, especially in areas of concentrated poverty.

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) conducts each TRALE process working with a varying set of collaborating partners. In each TRALE process, Aspen CSG asks approximately 50 rural doers, advocates, and innovators with grounded knowledge to answer a specific question important to advancing action that will increase rural prosperity and equity. The conversations with TRALE participants around each question take place in six to eight individual groups of fewer than 10 people each over a short period, no longer than two months. (See pages 3 and 4 for more specifics on this first TRALE process.)

The 46 practitioners and experts who participated in this TRALE 1 process (see page 50) were intentionally drawn from a wide range of rural geography, economy, background and experience. In terms of regions, 32 percent are in the South, 30 percent in the Great Lakes, 11 percent in the Plains Midwest, 9 percent in the Northeast, and 19 percent in the West. Thirty-six (36) percent of the participants are people of color, including Black, Native, Latinx or Hispanic, and Asian American or Pacific Islanders.

The TRALE 1 Call to Action principles were derived from themes that emerged across the eight individual TRALE 1 sessions. The following people worked together to shape this Call to Action:

- Researcher and writer Jason Gray, consulting with CSG, led the team that spotted and articulated those themes, highlighted key participant quotes and stories, and developed the Annotated List of Resources.
- Aspen CSG’s former executive director Janet Topolsky and CSG consultant Rebecca Huenink contributed to the writing and the editing.
- The entire CSG staff – Chris Estes, Bonita Robertson-Hardy, Erin Cahill, Devin Deaton, and Tyler Bowders – helped sharpen the concepts and conduct outreach to participants to review the content.
- Erin Autrey of [3 Story Design](#) created the design and layout for the Call to Action.

The TRALE process is used to explore and illuminate Building Blocks in the **Thrive Rural Framework** – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

For more on the Thrive Rural Framework, click the image to the right.



Community Strategies Group

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The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.*

Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has been committed to equitable rural prosperity. We work towards a future where communities and Native nations across the rural United States are places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

CSG serves as a connecting hub for equitable rural community and economic development. We design and facilitate action-inducing peer learning among rural practitioners, national and regional organizations, and policymakers. We build networks, foster collaboration, and advance best practices from the field. The foundation of our work is the Thrive Rural Framework – a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity.

For more on Aspen CSG,
see: www.aspencsg.org

For more on the Thrive Rural Framework,
see: www.thriverural.org