

THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW



The Thrive Rural Framework drives toward 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.**

WHAT IS THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK?

The Thrive Rural Framework is a new tool to help you take stock, target action, and gauge progress. We invite everyone involved in rural development — from local leaders to investors and philanthropists to state and national policymakers — to use this tool to spark new ways of thinking and acting to move communities, regions, and systems toward producing more widespread and equitable rural prosperity, health, and well-being.

WHY IS RURAL PROSPERITY IMPORTANT TO AMERICA?

Rural communities and Native nations are integral to our entire nation's economy, our culture — and our future. Rural communities across the country are unique and complex places filled with ingenuity, innovation, diversity, and resourcefulness. Our current and future sources of water, energy, and food are inherently rural, and people raised in rural communities provide essential leadership and workforce for both rural and urban America. A healthy and balanced respect and interplay between rural, urban, and suburban communities benefits everyone.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT THIS FRAMEWORK?

Many useful and important frameworks are organized around the life essentials that people and their communities need to prosper. Frameworks addressing these essentials — like housing, transportation, healthy environment, food, health care, dependent care, education, training, work, and connectivity — are critical to successful rural development.

The Thrive Rural Framework is different because it focuses on what we need to be true in communities and in larger systems to produce those essentials — things like shared thinking and fair-minded goals, the readiness of people and leadership to act, and the organizational structures to learn and act together. In short, the Thrive Rural Framework is grounded in the relationships and connections that underlie rural development: people, governments, and systems all working together and in parallel to achieve greater rural prosperity for all.



97% of America's land area is classified as rural.

Rural people are the stewards of the food, energy, water, and other life-essential resources that land provides — and on which our nation depends.



1 in 5 people in this country live in rural places.

1 in 4 rural people are people of color — and people of color are stabilizing or even growing rural populations in many places.



Rural areas have **higher rates of entrepreneurship** critical to job growth — and rural businesses have higher five-year survival rates — than urban areas and businesses.

Rural locales are the primary home for the manufacturing, energy, agriculture, and forestry sectors that drive much of the wealth generation at the foundation of our economy.



Nearly **1 in 4 veterans** return from active military careers to reside in rural communities.

More than **1 in 4 Americans** say they would like to live in a rural area.



Framework Outcome: Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

Rural Voice and Power

Equitable Aims and Design

Resources for Productive Action

Local-Level Building Blocks



Welcome All to the Community



Advance Personal Well-Being



Strengthen Local Ownership and Influence



Build from Current Assets



Balance Development Goals



Design for Everyone to Thrive



Prepare Action-Able Leadership



Organize an Action Infrastructure



Act as a Region



Build Momentum

Systems-Level Building Blocks



Rural Voice in Design and Action



Aligned Rural Fields and Actors



Accurate Rural Narrative



Balanced Development Outcomes



Cohesive Rural Policy Lens



Valued Rural Stewardship



Rural Stakeholder Equity



Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow



Rural Data for Analysis and Change



Regional Analysis and Action

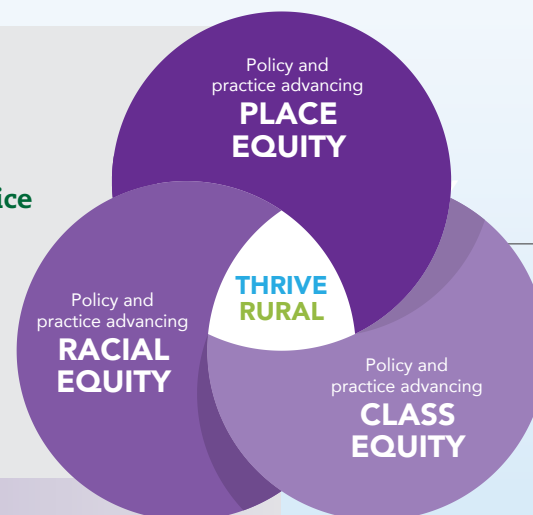
The Thrive Rural Framework recognizes that the work needs to happen at different levels — from **Local-Level** communities and regions to state and national **Systems-Level** action.

Building Blocks at each level are organized around three common themes: **rural voice and power**, **equitable aims and design**, and **resources for productive action**.

Local-Level Building Blocks are conditions on the ground that communities and regions can take action on directly, by themselves.

Systems-Level Building Blocks are beyond the scope of an individual community or region to change alone — though rural communities and people can certainly (and must) work together to influence these as well.

The Foundational Element — dismantling rural-discriminatory practices — is an underlying through-line: Action must be taken on this in every Building Block at both the Local and Systems levels.





Foundational Element: Dismantle Rural-Discriminatory Practices

To achieve equitable rural prosperity, we need to shift the underlying structures and conditions that disadvantage rural people and places. The Thrive Rural Framework focuses on shifting conditions that disadvantage rural people and communities based on place (size or location of the community), race (racial, immigrant, or cultural identity), and class (wealth or income). These conditions, which vary from place to place, can affect every aspect of life, from who is included in decision-making groups, to design of policies and regulations, to common practices like timing, location, and structure of meetings.

We call this a **Foundational Element** because it underlies all other elements of the Framework. For every building block, we need to ask: How is this affecting people and places differently based on place, race, and class? We can't achieve equitable rural prosperity without addressing historic and ongoing discriminatory practices — at every level — that keep rural people and places at a disadvantage.

Please click on linked [Foundational Element](#) for more.

Local-Level Building Blocks

Local-Level Building Blocks focus on conditions on the ground in rural places that individual communities or regions can work on by themselves.

- **Rural Voice and Power:** Is the community welcoming to all? Do people have what they need to participate and thrive? Are organizations owned or directed locally, guided by the full range of people who have a stake in their success?
- **Equitable Aims and Design:** Are projects designed for everyone to thrive, including those who have been historically excluded? Do they build on local assets? Are they designed to improve rural economies, built and natural resources, and livelihoods over the long term?
- **Resources for Productive Action:** Is there strong local leadership? Does the community have structures and systems to enable action? Are communities and regions working together and building hope and momentum?

Please click on linked [Local-Level Building Blocks](#) for more.

Systems-Level Building Blocks

Systems-Level Building Blocks focus on conditions in outside systems that are beyond the scope of individual communities or regions to change on their own, though communities can (and must) act together to influence them.

- **Rural Voice and Power:** Is there a strong rural voice in policy and action design at all levels? Are rural practitioners, strategies, and fields aligned? Is there an accurate rural narrative in media and dialogue?
- **Equitable Aims and Design:** Are policymakers and investors working to produce balanced rural development outcomes? Are federal and state governments working to align programs around a cohesive rural policy? Do outside actors value rural stewardship of resources and fairly compensate rural communities?
- **Resources for Productive Action:** Is there a ready flow of funding available for rural work and enterprise? Is the right data available to drive rural analysis and change? Do policies, programs, and investments encourage regional collaboration?

Please click on linked [Systems-Level Building Blocks](#) for more.

About Thrive Rural and Aspen CSG

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group developed the Thrive Rural framework collaboratively from the ground up with the **Thrive Rural Theory of Change Working Group** and input from the **Thrive Rural National Advisory Committee**. The members of these groups brought perspectives from the diversity of our country's rural places, economies, populations, and culture to the fruitful investigation, conversation, and collaboration that enabled this Framework's development.

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) convenes, equips, and inspires local leaders as they build more prosperous regions and advance those living on the economic margins — with our primary focus on rural America since our founding in 1985. Committed to increasing equity and opportunity, CSG advances an asset-based and systems-building approach to improve economic, social, and health outcomes through community and economic development.

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THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS



Putting It All Together

Framework Outcome:

Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

To build prosperity and decrease inequity in and for rural, we must strengthen:

	Rural Voice and Power	Equitable Aims and Design	Resources for Productive Action
 Key Building Blocks Local Communities and Regions <i>can address on their own</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome All to the Community • Advance Personal Well-Being • Strengthen Local Ownership and Influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build from Current Assets • Balance Development Goals • Design for Everyone to Thrive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare Action-Able Leadership • Organize an Action Infrastructure • Act as a Region • Build Momentum
 Key Building Blocks in Systems <i>outside local control but that locals can influence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Voice in Design and Action • Aligned Rural Fields and Actors • Accurate Rural Narrative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced Development Outcomes • Cohesive Rural Policy Lens • Valued Rural Stewardship • Rural Stakeholder Equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow • Rural Data for Analysis and Change • Regional Analysis and Action
 Foundational Element <i>dismantle practices that discriminate in and against rural</i>	Government, private sector, and civic organizations intentionally identify and eliminate policy, regulations, behaviors, and practices that have negative and exclusionary impact on rural communities because of the size of location (place), on people in poverty (class), and on Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrant, and specific cultural identities (race).		

HOW CAN I USE THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK?

The Thrive Rural Framework is designed to be a living tool that people working in communities and people designing and operating larger systems can use to promote more widespread and equitable rural prosperity. We encourage you to use it in the way that works for you — embed it in your processes to advance rural prosperity goals. See *Building Block attachments for guiding questions in each area*.

- **Take stock:** Use the Framework to see where your community or system stands with each Building Block and where you most need to focus to advance rural prosperity for all in your region, role, or system. The Framework can be embedded in local, regional, state, or national planning and strategy processes and used to anchor conversations about priorities.
- **Target action:** Use the Framework to design initiatives and programs that strengthen Building Blocks to broaden and deepen rural prosperity. The Framework can provide a point of reference for strategy development, proposal writing, implementation design, and productive collaboration.
- **Measure progress:** Use the Framework to understand how your action is working to advance more widespread and equitable rural prosperity. The Framework can help you conceive and pinpoint missing and relevant indicators useful for assessing progress and impact — and refining your action — over time.

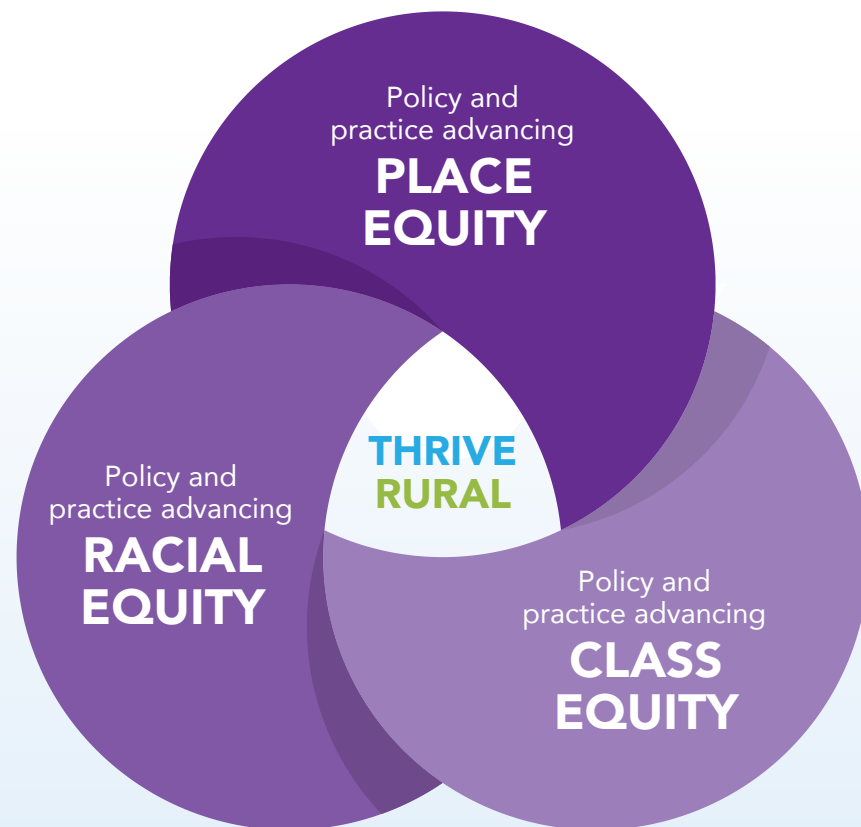
Visit www.aspenincsg.org for more information and to access a growing range of resources that can help you explore and use the Framework.



FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENT

- At both the Local and Systems Levels, the Thrive Rural Framework requires identifying and dismantling historical and ongoing discriminatory practices that disadvantage rural people and places.
- Much historic and existing exclusion has negatively affected rural people and rural areas based on:
 - **Place** — location or size of community
 - **Race** — racial, immigrant, or cultural identity
 - **Class** — wealth or income level
- This sidelining of rural places, people, and economies can be embedded in any of these “structures” — and more:
 - Policy language and implementation design
 - Regulations and criteria/scoring for access or participation
 - Common practices and behaviors (timing, location, agenda design)
 - Composition of decision-making groups

See Rural-Discriminatory Practices examples on the next page.



HOW CAN I START DISMANTLING RURAL-DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES?

For each Building Block, at both the Local and Systems Levels, ask:

- In our community, region, or system, how are people and places participating differently or experiencing worse or better results in relation to this Building Block based on race, place, and class?
- What historical or existing exclusion is at work in policy, practices, leadership, or behaviors that is causing or perpetuating each of these differences? What is the change that is needed?
- What will it take in individual, organizational, or collaborative action to influence or make that change?



FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENT

RURAL-DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES EXAMPLES

The following examples help illustrate discriminatory practices — some intended, many unintended — that have shown up in specific systems or local communities or regions. These are a very small sample meant to spark thinking and conversation about your place or system — not to limit it!



Examples at Local Level

Place

- **Access to services:** Public services (e.g., child care, recreation, health clinics) are located in or convenient to only certain sectors of the community.
- **Housing:** Workforce and low-income housing is sited in sections of the community with less access to transportation and good jobs.

Race

- **Deed restrictions on land:** Though many are eliminated now, they drove segregated housing patterns that persist to this day.
- **Local siting of waste and industrial pollution sites:** Sites are overwhelmingly zoned into places where people of color live.
- **Racial segregation of school districts**

Class

- **Participation and voice:** Leadership and decision-making meetings set at times that low-paid “essential workers” cannot participate.
- **Disaster response:** Repairs are made in wealthy areas first; poorer areas are addressed last or not built back at all.



Examples at Systems Level

- **Internet:** For-profit national internet and cell providers claim “service coverage” of rural towns — when they run lines only to Main Street or the school (or less) or provide only sub-standard service in rural.
- **Competitive vs. Formula Funding:** Federal or state programs provide funding to larger cities reliably and predictably using a known formula, but instead require rural places to compete for the remaining small pool of funding — adding higher difficulty and the fact that some get no funding at all.

- **Lending restrictions:** Black farmers in the past have been denied opportunities for relief or support (lending) through USDA programs.
- **Redistricting:** District borders are gerrymandered to minimize influence of populations of color.
- **Land Rights and treaties with Native nations:** Many treaties and agreements have not been honored — recent lawsuits have demanded accounting and just compensation for what was promised.

- **Mortgage interest deduction on taxes:** Only those who are wealthy enough to both buy a home and have enough deductions to use Schedule A can benefit.
- **Benefit cliffs:** The potential to fall off needed SNAP or child healthcare benefits can provide disincentives to get (or accept) a raise to a higher wage.
- **Cash bail:** Those who can’t afford bail are more likely to lose their job or home while awaiting trial.

Note that these three types of discrimination intersect and build on each other, and on other types of discrimination that can occur in communities and systems.

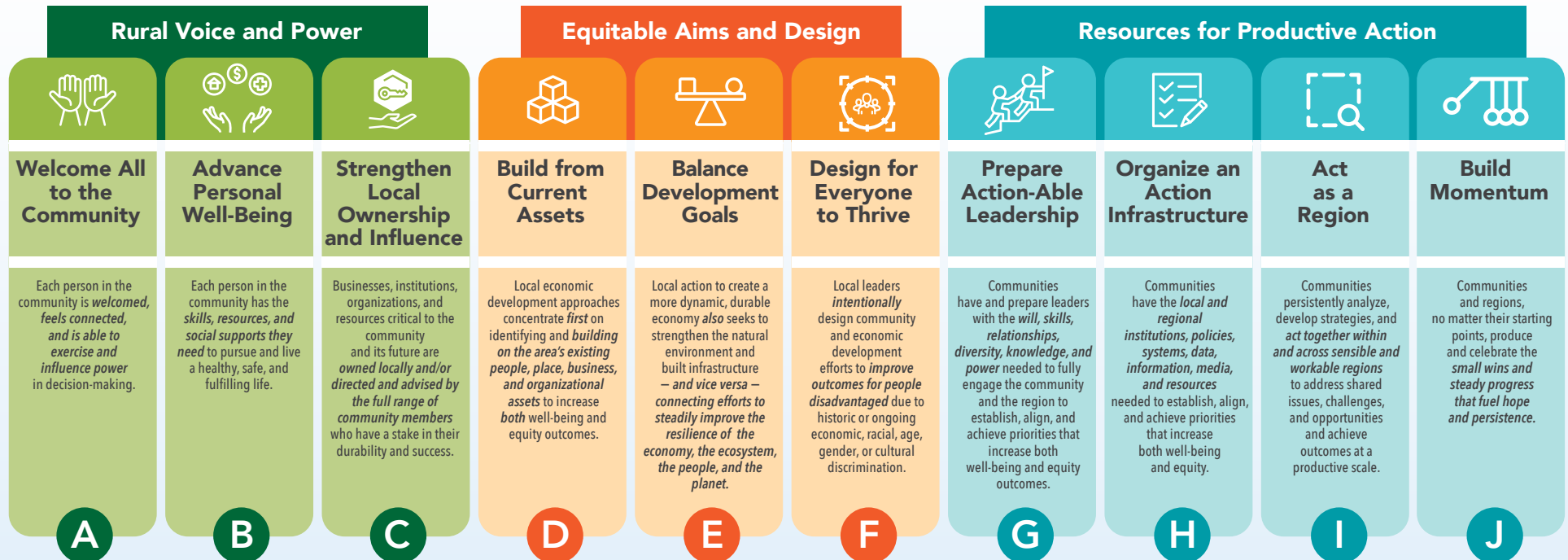


LOCAL-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS

THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK LOCAL-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS



The Local-Level Building Blocks include conditions on the ground in rural places and regions that **individual rural communities or regions can act on by themselves**. Each Building Block (A-J) is necessary because it has an impact on being able to achieve more widespread and equitable rural prosperity.



Use these Local-Level Building Blocks to take stock, target effort, and measure progress for action that a specific rural community or region can take on its own to improve the local conditions necessary for more widespread and fair rural prosperity. For each Building Block (A-J), ask:

- What is our starting point? How true is each statement for our community?
- What discriminatory practices or policies exist that keep us from making more progress in each Building Block?
- With this context in mind, what are our priorities: Which Building Blocks do we most need to strengthen to unleash progress on the others?
- What needs to happen next to strengthen our priority Building Blocks? And what will it take for us to make that happen?
- What would indicate progress in strengthening these Building Blocks? What would that progress look like over the next year?

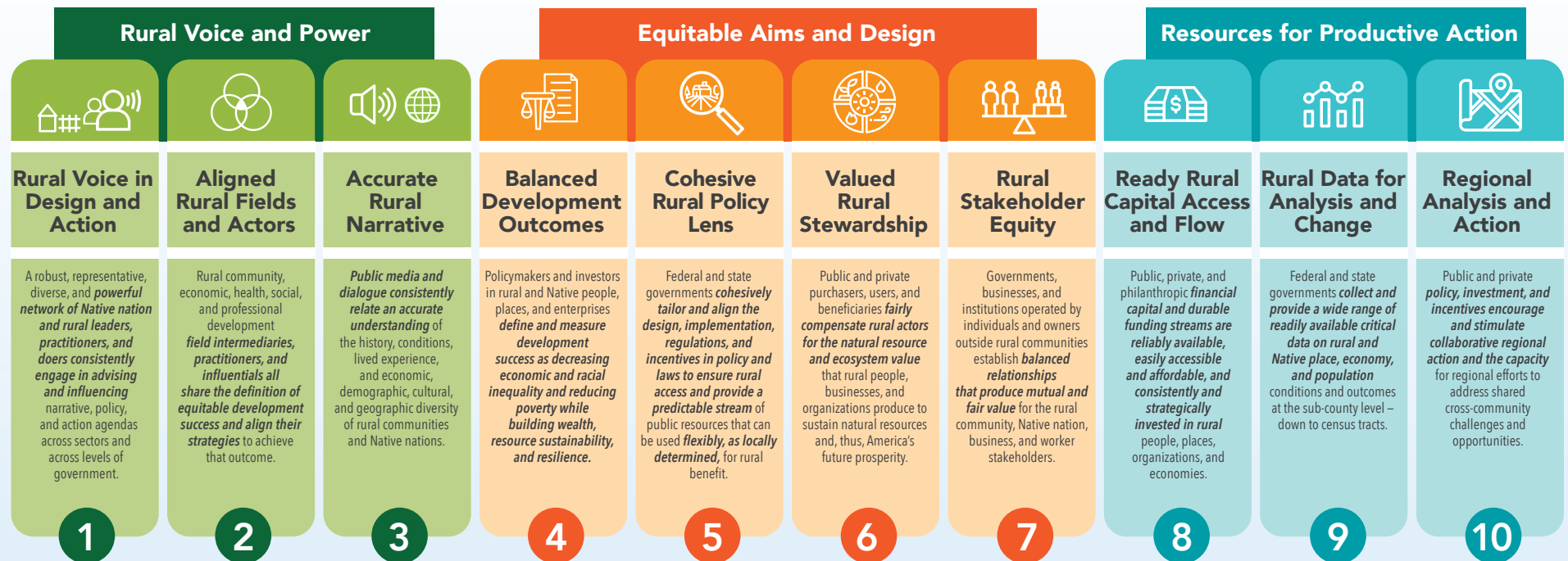


SYSTEMS-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS

THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK SYSTEMS-LEVEL BUILDING BLOCKS



The Systems-Level Building Blocks include driving forces and conditions that are in larger systems **outside the direct control of individual rural communities or regions**. People and organizations that design, guide, and implement these systems must act to change them — and rural places and people can (and must) act together to influence them. These include a wide range of public and private systems, from regional and multi-state financial institutions, to state and federal policy and programs, to issue advocacy organizations, to information hubs and national media — and more. Each Building Block (1-10) is necessary because it has an impact on being able to achieve more widespread and equitable rural prosperity.



Use these Systems-Level Building Blocks to take stock, target action, and measure progress on the status of systems. Those who lead and work in systems can change them directly; rural people and organizations can exercise influence to guide that change. In either case, for each Building Block (1-10), ask:

- How “true” is this Building Block statement?
- What discriminatory practices or policies exist within the system that hinders progress?
- In the context of our work — locally or at the systems level — which of these Building Blocks are priorities for our action?
- What can we do to strengthen those priority Building Blocks?
- What would indicate progress in strengthening these Building Blocks? What would that progress look like over the next year?