

THROUGH NATURAL DISASTER TO PROSPERITY

A CALL TO ACTION

Five Principles to Improve Health and Economic Outcomes for Rural Communities and Native Nations

As climate change continues to drive the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, we have an opportunity to meet the moment by changing the way we approach rural disaster work and filling critical gaps in current efforts.

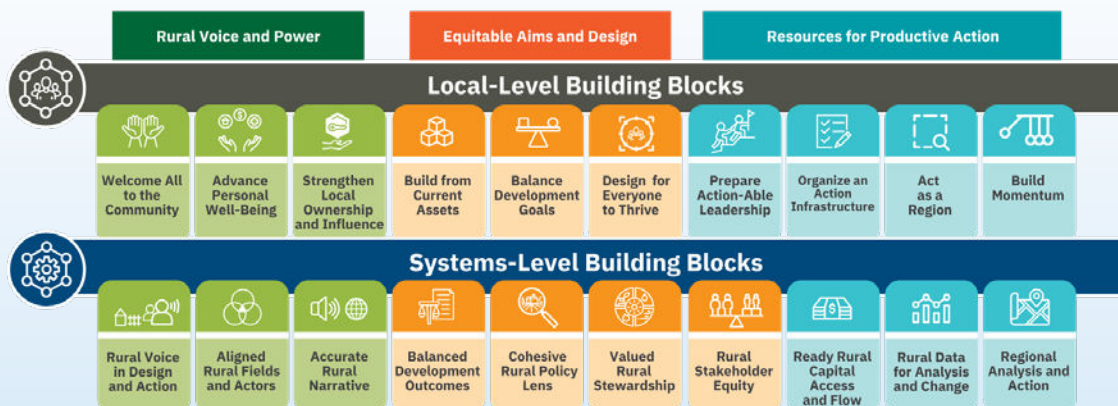
This will require a reorientation of disaster work from a focus on just fixing what disasters break (an insurance or replacement approach) to a broader focus on advancing equitable community development outcomes (a community prosperity or opportunity approach).

This shift in focus will enable disaster work to move out of a “patch it again” cycle and onto a trajectory that advances fundamental community prosperity outcomes, ultimately leading to healthy, thriving people in strong and stable rural and Indigenous communities.

THE PROCESS

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) convened 39 rural economic and community development practitioners from a diverse range of rural communities and Native nations to inform Through Natural Disaster to Prosperity: A Call to Action. Click here for the list of participants.

Aspen CSG’s [Thrive Rural Framework](#) is a tool to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity. We’ve noted the most relevant framework building blocks at the start of each principle.



The Foundational Element requires identifying and dismantling historical and ongoing discriminatory practices that disadvantage rural people and places based on place, race, & class.



5 PRINCIPLES TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC OUTCOMES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES AND NATIVE NATIONS

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PRINCIPLE 1: Understand and address the underlying conditions unique to rural affecting disaster vulnerability, response, and recovery.

The natural, physical, social, and policy landscapes of rural communities and Native nations affect the communities’ vulnerability to disasters and their ability to respond to and recover from them. To build thriving communities that can respond to and recover from acute disasters, we need a community prosperity approach that builds on each community’s unique conditions, including strengths and challenges.



Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address conditions that affect rural disaster vulnerability, such as housing and environmental degradation. This requires sustained effort, long-term federal, state, and local programming, and integration of disaster considerations into existing programming. • Integrate disaster strategies with community planning. Consider disaster-related issues in regular community planning processes, including thorough vulnerability and risk assessments. • Ensure that strategies and plans are aligned. Coordinate disaster planning with other community planning efforts and regularly assess plans across the community and region for alignment and potential conflict. • Remove barriers to use of local assets for disaster response, including assessing local resources (e.g., buildings) and how they can be repurposed in a disaster context. • Make information on risk easily accessible. Require consistent and full disclosure of risk (e.g., flood and fire risk for both homebuyers and renters). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support analysis of underlying conditions, including deeper considerations like structural discrimination that affect rural communities and Native nations’ vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters. • Use and promote measurement and evaluation practices that reflect underlying conditions affecting rural communities and Native nations’ vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters. • Bring actors together across sectors to address underlying conditions, ensuring disaster considerations are integrated into new and existing policy and programming. • Ensure that convenings and conversations around disaster work include people and groups who have been historically left out of previous planning and discussions. Build trust by authentically listening to their perspectives. • Elevate consideration of underlying rural conditions in national and regional conversations around disaster and community development–related policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key community members to engage in disaster work, especially community members from marginalized groups and those who have been left out of previous discussions, and bring them into the work early. Who are the elders, youth, or informal leaders who can make things happen in this community? Build trust by authentically listening to their perspectives. • Look at the big picture of a community’s underlying conditions. Consider how each element affects the whole and what efforts and areas should be prioritized. Use the Thrive Rural Framework as a tool to support this process. • Assess community resources and assets and consider how they can be used to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.



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PRINCIPLE 2:

Advance worldviews that restore balance and relationships among rural communities and natural systems.

To create the conditions for thriving rural communities and Native nations with resilient infrastructure, we need to shift our worldviews to accommodate a full and balanced picture of the reciprocal relationships between human beings and the natural world. Rural places across the country have much to learn from Indigenous communities undertaking this work. Still, that learning itself must be balanced and reciprocal — undertaken with humility on the part of the learners and just compensation for those sharing experiences and knowledge.



Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote or expand policies and programs that conserve or restore natural ecosystems and working landscapes. Support basic research that grows our understanding of reciprocity between humans and natural systems and that includes representation from a wide spectrum of expertise, including Indigenous perspectives. Increase staff literacy regarding Native nations’ history and concerns, both to facilitate respectful and effective working relationships and to integrate Indigenous perspectives into broader work. Support practical collaboration within and across regions to advance learning and integrate consideration of reciprocity between human and natural systems into community development work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Convene peer learning networks to facilitate a deeper understanding of reciprocity between humans and natural systems, and that includes representation from a wide spectrum of expertise (e.g., faith communities, science, and Indigenous perspectives). Support work within Native nations to explore and document place-based knowledge and approaches to community prosperity and disasters. Increase staff and grantee literacy regarding Indigenous history and expertise to facilitate respectful and effective working relationships and integrate Indigenous perspectives into broader work. Document effectiveness of regenerative strategies and approaches to community prosperity and disaster mitigation. Lift up and disseminate stories of a healthy balance between humans and natural systems and the relationship of this balance to rural communities and Native nations’ vulnerability to, response to, and recovery from disasters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrate consideration of balance and reciprocity between human and natural systems into community prosperity and disaster work. Intentionally design efforts to engage diverse perspectives, including Native nation communities, to learn how to better incorporate regenerative practices and approaches within inclusive local and regional efforts.



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PRINCIPLE 3:

Use disaster response to advance equity and increase regional prosperity.

Communities with higher poverty rates and less capacity due to structural discrimination and disinvestment may be more vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters and less able to access and activate the resources necessary for recovery and long-term prosperity. Disaster preparedness, response, and recovery programs must be intentionally designed to mitigate and address inequities — one way is to ensure that those most affected are part of the leadership in planning, response, and recovery.

Design for Everyone to Thrive	Balanced Development Outcomes	Rural Stakeholder Equity	Cohesive Rural Policy Lens

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase USDA Rural Development (RD) involvement in federal disaster management, leveraging RD's deep knowledge of rural communities in groups such as the FEMA-led multi-agency taskforce. • Build relationships in communities ahead of disasters, including with historically marginalized groups within communities. • Facilitate inclusive planning processes, providing accessible spaces for all community members, regardless of needs (e.g., translation services, physically accessible spaces). • Support local networks' and organizations' disaster planning, response, and recovery efforts, including by assessing and filling gaps in programming and funding opportunities that prevent certain types of organizations (e.g., community-based organizations, non-federally-recognized tribes) from engaging in this work. • Prioritize local hiring and contracting for disaster work, given that community residents know the issues best and are best positioned to hit the ground running in a disaster situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support research on and evaluation of equity and access in disaster preparation, response, and recovery (e.g., inclusion of grassroots non-profits in the work of state Emergency Operations Centers). • Create regional relationships and networks to facilitate equitable disaster preparation, response, and recovery efforts. • Engage with grassroots community groups early and often to support disaster preparation and to "pre-certify" organizations for rapid funding in the event of a disaster. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring people from across the community into disaster work. Ask who is missing from groups and collaborations, and engage them; this includes making spaces and systems accessible. • Focus on improving outcomes for the community, especially for community members affected by structural discrimination. Shift disaster work from an insurance approach to an inclusive community prosperity approach.



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PRINCIPLE 4: Build local and regional capacity to address disasters.

To lay the groundwork for effective disaster response, it is crucial to build systems and structures at both the local and regional levels that have the capacity to respond — and communicate, collaborate, and coordinate — when the time comes.

Prepare Action-Able Leadership	Organize an Action Infrastructure	Rural Data for Analysis and Change	Ready Rural Capital Access and Flow

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish inclusive cross-sector local leadership teams to plan for, respond to, and support recovery from disasters and provide consistent agency participation and support over time. • Incentivize agency participation in and prioritization of community-led efforts. • Engage connected institutions on leadership teams (e.g., Economic Development Administration-funded regional councils of government, Land-Grant affiliated Extension Service offices). • Train agency staff on working with rural communities and Native nations. • Provide training and materials to local leadership teams and organizations, including on disaster planning, response simulations, and mitigation efforts. • Designate local “navigators” to help communities negotiate complex federal disaster systems, including funding and planning assistance. • Streamline complex systems and requirements to allow communities to focus on the work at hand. • Align evaluation systems across agencies and sectors to avoid duplicative and onerous data collection and allow communities to focus on the work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support development of local leadership teams as they build infrastructure for disaster planning, response, and recovery. • Develop and pilot programs that help communities navigate complex federal systems. While public navigator systems are ideal, philanthropy can support this development by funding projects that test and pilot these ideas. • Help develop and pilot local information-sharing systems. Publish learnings so communities can build their own systems. • Provide fiscal agency support to smaller community organizations that are not able to take on the risk and burden of federal funding. • Provide technical assistance with federal systems, including funding grant development and administration support as necessary. • Launch the development of continuity of operations plans for local and regional non-profits. Hold workshops or create workbooks with model plans that can help practitioners prepare their organization to be in working order during and after a disaster. • Align reporting and evaluation systems across funders and sectors to avoid duplicative and onerous data collection and allow communities to focus on the work. • Align internal evaluation and measurement with intended outcomes, including measuring inclusion and equity outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create “care infrastructure” for the community, including local cross-sector leadership teams. • Create disaster plans for community-based organizations, including detailed continuity of operations plans that explain what to do to keep the organization in action to support the community in the event of a disaster. • Gather information on local, regional, and national resources before a disaster strikes; know who is in charge of what resources and how they can be accessed.



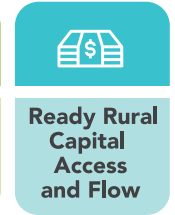
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PRINCIPLE 5:

Provide flexible and responsive funding for disaster preparation, response, and recovery.

Beyond the challenges of limitations and strictures on funding, practitioners expressed fear around engaging with federal funding, given the high stakes involved with potentially making a mistake in project administration or reporting. Flexible, responsive funding opportunities could enable rural communities and Native nations to take a community prosperity approach to disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, improving outcomes and building long-term prosperity for all.



Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change regulations that can prevent communities from accessing FEMA funds if they accept funding from other sources. Communities need both immediate and long-term assistance, and FEMA regulations should reflect this reality. • Develop short-term “bridge funding” for communities. This could involve zero-interest loans for businesses until FEMA funds begin to flow. • Create programs that fund long-term prosperity and sustainability, not just immediate disaster needs. • Create funding programs flexible enough to meet specific local needs. Not all communities need to do the same things to prepare for, respond to, or recover from a disaster. Funding programs should allow communities to make a case for their resilience needs rather than dictating approaches. • Clarify and simplify regulations related to managing disaster funding to increase access for smaller organizations and communities. This is particularly important for Native nations that rely on direct aid from the federal government and where jurisdictions are fuzzy between states and tribes. • Trust rural people and communities to make responsive, quick, and wise decisions about spending money in a disaster. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support accountability analysis of public and private disaster funding to assess impact on equity and community prosperity outcomes. • Create low-friction systems to distribute funding after a disaster, including pre-certifying organizations (see recommendations in Principle 3) and simplifying administration and reporting requirements. • Provide short-term “bridge funding” for communities to fill gaps before federal funds begin to flow. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess potential needs and develop possible spending plans for flexible disaster funding.

Community Strategies Group



The following people worked together to shape this Call to Action:

- Action-Learning Exchanges were facilitated by Chris Estes, with coordination support from Tyler Bowders.
- Aspen CSG's consultant Jason Gray assisted in the interview process, identified the themes, and highlighted participant quotes and stories.
- Aspen CSG's consultant Rebecca Huenink led the writing process.
- The entire Aspen CSG staff – Bonita Robertson-Hardy, Chris Estes, Erin Cahill, Devin Deaton, and Tyler Bowders – helped edit and sharpen the concepts.

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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 healthy 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