

# CENTERING COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

A CALL TO ACTION

## Four Principles for Fostering Rural and Indigenous Well-Being with Asset-Based Development

- 1 Rural Development Hubs are key to building trusting relationships across sectors and aligning regional well-being.
- 2 Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.
- 3 Local wealth building is vital for Community Development Organizations to build and retain personal assets and community wealth.
- 4 Community well-being metrics are the best measure of holistic development success.



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The [Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group](#) (Aspen CSG) invited our partner, Vanessa Roanhorse, to open this report with a preface that reflects her unique perspective and lived experience, which deeply informs and complements the work that follows.

“Across the United States, communities are grappling with political upheaval exacerbating economic instability, climate change, political division, and systemic inequities that have long been ignored or amplified by policies that fail to center collective well-being. Rural and Indigenous communities, in particular, have endured generations of disinvestment and extractive economic practices prioritizing short-term gains over long-term sustainability. Despite this, these communities possess deep knowledge, resilience, and systems of care that have enabled them to survive and thrive for generations.

Now, more than ever, we must shift our mindset from scarcity to abundance, recognizing that our collective prosperity is inseparable from our shared responsibility for one another. Indigenous worldviews have always understood that our health, economies, and futures are interlinked—that no person, community, or system exists in isolation. In times of uncertainty, the path forward is not to retreat into individualism but to strengthen relationships, invest in reciprocity, and build economies that reflect our shared humanity and obligation to the land and future generations.

This Call to Action is about more than economic development—it is about restoring balance, trust, and collective agency. It acknowledges that the solutions we need are already within our communities and that the answers will not come from top-down approaches but from Indigenous-led, community-driven models that honor relationships, local knowledge, and self-determination.

The principles and strategies outlined here arise from those actively shaping a different future—one where economic prosperity is measured not by extraction but by how well communities care for their people, land, culture, and future generations. This is an invitation to redefine success, challenge outdated systems, and invest in models that recognize that true abundance comes from collective care, not competition. Our interdependence is risk mitigation.

At this pivotal moment, we face a choice: to continue on a path of division and scarcity or to embrace a future founded on interconnection, shared responsibility, and the wisdom of communities who have always understood that our well-being is intertwined. Now is the time to listen, invest, and act in ways that honor the wealth that already exists in our people, our cultures, and our lands.”



**Vanessa Roanhorse,**  
**Roanhorse Consulting, New Mexico**



## INTRODUCTION

### Creating New Opportunities from Existing Assets

We all want each and every person to live a healthy, thriving life supported by strong communities and economic opportunity. In rural and Indigenous places, this vision is challenged by systemic inequities and historic disinvestment. Still, people in these communities show resilience, innovation, and leadership. By working across sectors, centering local voices, and using an asset-based approach to economic development, we can build fairer systems that reflect community strengths and priorities.

Conversations about health and well-being traditionally focus on access to and affordability of health care. With the development and adoption of the [social determinants of health](#), which focus on a broader set of areas that influence how “healthy” someone’s life is, the rural development field has moved towards referring to “well-being” as a much more interconnected and interdependent frame with other community development interventions.

Social determinants are the social, economic, and environmental factors necessary to reduce the health and economic disparities prevalent in rural and Indigenous communities. Social determinants of health include factors like poverty, availability of stable employment and income, educational attainment and literacy, safe housing, access to safe and affordable transportation, access to healthy and affordable food, quality healthcare, access to community infrastructure, lack of discrimination barriers, access to human and medical services, among others. In Indigenous communities and communities of color, additional factors come into play, such as self-determination, access and utilization of traditional land and healing resources, historical trauma, race-based discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural continuity.

**Fair and just progress requires community-led efforts**, where communities define their own visions of health and well-being. This approach fosters the buy-in and coalition-building necessary to cross issue-area silos and implement policies and practices that reflect a community’s unique definitions and goals. Community-led efforts take time and investment in relationship and consensus building, which must be seen as vital for long-term success.

Achieving well-being in rural and Indigenous communities requires understanding and collaboration among residents, the private sector, government, nonprofits, and philanthropy. An asset-based economic development approach starts with identifying and building upon the strengths or “capitals” that are present in communities, shifting away from the traditional deficit-based perspective. For more insights and recommendations, explore our [report](#) on this topic.

Participants interviewed for this report shared their perspectives on both the challenges and successes in achieving equitable well-being for rural and Indigenous communities. Recognizing history, culture, lived experiences, and the structural barriers rooted in historical discrimination is a crucial starting point. This acknowledgment helps lay the foundation of trust necessary for meaningful collaboration.







**Listening to these shared experiences, centered on the commonalities of place, is an essential step toward reversing long-standing inequities and building trust to drive progress.**

Each region has unique needs shaped by its history and experiences. To foster trust and engagement, embracing adaptability and flexibility in partnering, communication, and [funding approaches](#) is vital. Only by tailoring efforts to the specific dynamics of each community can we build authentic, trusting relationships and create lasting change.

## WealthWorks as a regional wealth-building approach

The [WealthWorks](#) framework of rural economic development provides a valuable lens for understanding communities by focusing on their assets, or “capitals,” and identifying opportunities to build value chains that support local wealth creation. Aspen CSG played a central role as a national partner when the Ford Foundation and other collaborators convened a community of practice to develop this framework. This work, which continues to evolve, offers a fresh approach to economic development.

WealthWorks emphasizes eight forms of capital, encouraging an asset-based mindset for economic and community development. Providing a shared language for community members and leaders enables communities to build on their strengths and pursue a more comprehensive vision of well-being—shifting the focus away from deficits and toward opportunities. Starting from existing assets can help foster balanced, locally-led, and regionally-driven economic development strategies.

**Many community assets, particularly intangible ones, are often overlooked when assessing wealth.** Leveraging these intangibles—such as social connections, cultural identity, and local knowledge—encourages communities to create their own solutions and advocate for their needs through community-led approaches.

Building these intangibles takes intentional investment, leadership development, and time. However, developing a shared understanding of well-being within the community can drive progress toward collective goals. Report participants mentioned the need to ask communities the following question to lead to shared goals: *What would you want your community to be like for your kids both now and in the future?*

Aspen CSG has previously brought together rural practitioners to explore what it takes to better align rural health and economic development, resulting in the report [Collaborative Strategies for Rural Health & Economic Prosperity](#). This report's principles expand on those efforts by exploring local and regional strategies to grow local wealth and enhance well-being.

**“WealthWorks changed how we think, measure, and work. Its shared language and models helped us move from intuition to intention. We now measure success across all forms of capital and include voices that were missing.**

**By focusing on the who and what, rather than miles and pounds of food, we were able to engage funders. WealthWorks has become one of our most valuable tools.”**



**Arlene Jones**  
Sprout MN, Minnesota

**“If communities recognize the fullest value of their existing assets, then they can build momentum around a goal rooted in that asset.”**



**Mark Gabriel Little**  
NCGrowth, UNC Chapel Hill,  
North Carolina

**“Rural communities need a prospectus that looks both inward and outward—something that highlights local assets, tells a clear story about where the community is headed, and helps attract the right kind of support and investment. It’s about shifting the narrative from what’s lacking to what’s possible.”**



**Melissa Levy**  
Community Roots, Vermont



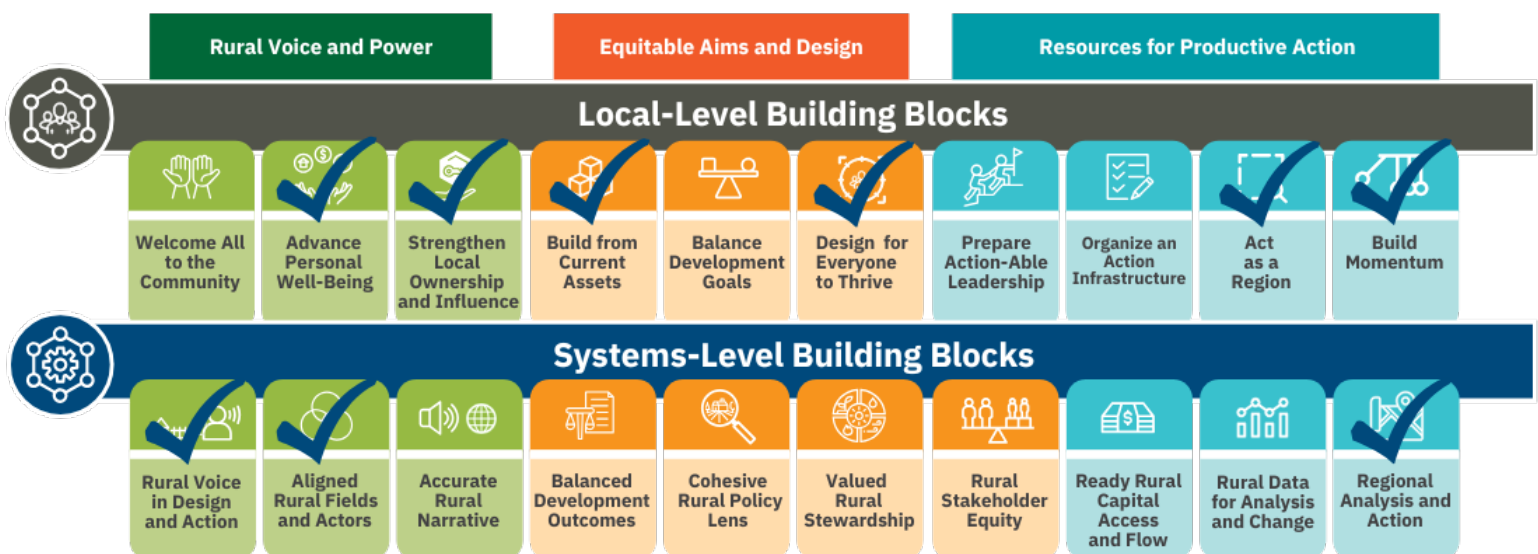
## Integrating Well-Being as a Regional Measure of Success:

1. **Adopt the WealthWorks capitals as a shared language:** Work with community leaders and members to recognize and map assets across the eight forms of wealth, creating a common foundation for understanding and action.
2. **Create spaces for collaboration:** Establish both physical and virtual venues for sharing challenges, solving problems, and building trust.
3. **Build relationships and partnerships early and often:** Focus on growing social capital and establishing collaborative networks beyond immediate grant opportunities.
4. **Align on a shared understanding of well-being:** Invite diverse perspectives and worldviews, understanding that many things can exist at the same time. Engage with community members to identify what matters most to them. A collection of shared metrics of success is essential for building coalitions and fostering a sense of mutual benefit.
5. **Start small to build trust:** Before tackling larger initiatives, begin with smaller, manageable projects and groups to cultivate relationships and trust.
6. **Develop a community prospectus:** Showcase the community's assets and shared goals to both internal and external audiences. This prospectus can highlight strengths and articulate collective aspirations.

By following these steps, communities can strengthen their assets, build trust, and advance toward a more sustainable and equitable vision of regional well-being.

## THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK BUILDING BLOCKS

Aspen CSG's [Thrive Rural Framework](#) provides both a shared vision and a line of sight for our current understanding of the local and systemic conditions necessary to realize that vision. The ultimate outcome of the framework is 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. This report focuses on the building blocks highlighted below.



**Foundational Element:** Identify and dismantle historical and ongoing discriminatory practices that disadvantage rural people and places based on place, race, & class.





## DEFINITIONS

The following definitions are foundational terms and concepts used in this Call to Action. These definitions are intended to serve as a baseline for understanding and are not exhaustive or final.

**Assets/Capital/Wealth:** These terms are used interchangeably to refer to any resource (for examples, see: Community Capitals) that can improve a community and/or generate additional resources.

**Capacity Building:** Developing the ongoing ability of an organization or community to accomplish the goals they set for themselves.

**Community Capacity:** The combined influence of a community's commitment, resources, and skills that can be mobilized to build on strengths and address challenges or opportunities.

**Community Capitals:** All the elements in a community with the potential to be resources — they can be invested, saved, or depleted. In the [WealthWorks](#) framework, the eight capitals include intellectual, financial, natural, cultural, built, political, individual, and social.

**Community Well-being:** The holistic [combination](#) of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions that individuals and communities identify as necessary for flourishing and reaching their potential.

**Equity:** Fairness and justice in outcomes and impacts, rather than just equal access or opportunity.

**Equitable Development:** Development efforts aimed at achieving fair and just outcomes, particularly for communities and individuals impacted by historical and ongoing structural discrimination.

**Equitable Rural Prosperity:** The ultimate outcome of the Thrive Rural Framework — fostering communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

**Financial Wellness:** The state of having both financial security and the freedom to make choices that support one's well-being, both now and in the future.

**Reciprocity:** The mutual exchange of resources, respect, or benefits, where actions foster trust and commitment over time.

**Region:** A geographic area spanning multiple jurisdictions (e.g., counties, states) where collaborative initiatives can be aligned for cultural, economic, or logistical reasons.

**Social Infrastructure:** The essential organizations, spaces, and systems that [enable social connections](#), fostering relationships that help communities thrive.

**Social Capital:** The networks of relationships, trust, and norms that enable collective action and cooperation within a community.

**Value Chain:** A [coordinated network](#) of people, businesses, organizations, and agencies working together to meet market demand while simultaneously building localized wealth and self-reliance.

**WealthWorks:** A holistic [approach](#) to local and regional economic development that connects a community's assets to market demands. WealthWorks seeks to build sustainable livelihoods by enhancing prosperity, increasing jobs and incomes for lower-income residents, and strengthening regional self-reliance.



## THE TRALE PROCESS: STRUCTURE AND PARTICIPANTS

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This Call to Action emerges from Aspen CSG's Thrive Rural Action-Learning Exchange (TRALE), a dynamic process designed to rapidly draw on-the-ground insights and experiences to inspire breakthrough ideas and advance rural policy and practice.

For this TRALE process, Aspen CSG brought together 21 economic and community development practitioners from rural and Indigenous communities across the United States. These practitioners, advocates, and innovators shared their experiences and ideas to explore a central question: *What will it take to center equitable rural and Indigenous community well-being within asset-based economic development approaches?*

The group's collective expertise spans a wide array of fields, including rural community economic development, housing, transportation, small business development, family asset building, development finance, grassroots community engagement and advocacy, and regional development. Together, they represent deep experience and leadership, serving as highly respected and dedicated changemakers in their communities.





## Cross-Cutting Recommendations

As TRALE participants examined how to center equitable rural and Indigenous community well-being within asset-based economic development approaches, several overarching recommendations repeatedly surfaced. These cross-cutting recommendations are relevant to all guiding principles and apply to all types of actors involved in this work.

1. **Honor history, culture, and lived experience:**  
Incorporate these elements into decision-making processes with communities to acknowledge and address the historical structural discrimination rooted in place, class, and race.
2. **Center shared definitions of quality of life and well-being:** Recognize that folks with different worldviews often define community quality of life, health, and well-being in similar ways. These shared definitions should inform development goals and measures of success.
3. **Build trust and relationships as a foundation:**  
Encourage rural and Indigenous communities to foster trust, relationships, networks, and self-worth, creating the groundwork for transformational work.
4. **Create flexible, accessible funding sources:**  
Develop funding and program criteria that are more flexible, patient, user-friendly, and accessible to rural and Indigenous communities to support future planning.
5. **Promote adaptability and long-term investment:**  
Advocate for flexibility in planning and funding approaches to tackle systemic issues and enable sustainable, community-driven solutions. Focus on well-being and anti-displacement as central goals.

**"Hard skills are not more important than the soft skills – lived experience, cultural competency. If we have folks with lived experience brought in, we will have a more meaningful impact."**



**Vanessa Roanhorse**  
Roanhorse Consulting, New Mexico

**"And it takes one very critical element for this to happen, and it's called trust, and trust doesn't happen overnight with rural communities, it doesn't happen overnight with anybody, but certainly not with rural communities, because they have been taken advantage so many times."**



**Olga Morales-Pate**  
RCAP, New Mexico/Washington, DC

**"If an organization has diverse leadership, then they'll likely be able to cultivate more diverse relationships and community. And if an organization has relationships and community, they'll be better positioned to engage in developing broad community impacts."**



**Carrie Kissel**  
NADO, Washington, DC

## CASE STUDY: BUILDING CAPACITY

The [Minnesota Initiative Foundations](#) are a network of six place-based community foundations designed to strengthen the state's diverse rural communities, including Native and immigrant populations. Each foundation focuses on addressing local needs while fostering collaboration and equity. For example, the Initiative Foundation partnered with Anishinabe Legal Services, a nonprofit in Cass Lake, to combat housing insecurity, a leading cause of homelessness in tribal communities. Through the Transformative Funding for Nonprofits grant, the organization provided legal support to low-income individuals on the Leech Lake, Red Lake, and White Earth reservations, helping clients navigate the legal system to prevent evictions.

Additionally, the grant funded the creation of a comprehensive housing manual, which will be distributed to Native nations in Minnesota. This resource aims to educate community members about their housing rights and responsibilities, fostering stability and empowering individuals to advocate for themselves in housing-related matters. This initiative exemplifies how tailored funding and support can address systemic challenges while building capacity within Native communities.



## 1

**Principle 1:**

Rural Development Hubs are key to building trusting relationships across sectors and aligning regional well-being.

## **TRALE participants emphasized the importance of investing in trust-building, partnerships, and capacity-building efforts to achieve broader well-being outcomes.**

Trust is not just a moral foundation—it is a practical necessity for overcoming challenges in well-being and economic development. Where trust exists, partners can resolve conflict and move toward collective goals quicker, without reservation. Without trust, communities struggle to secure resources, collaborate on solutions, and sustain progress. Many rural areas still bear the scars of having “things done to them or for them,” creating a legacy of distrust toward external actors. Rebuilding trust paves the way for community-led initiatives, enabling rural leaders to plan for the short and long term, recruit resources, and make decisions that reflect local priorities.

Rural Development Hubs—intermediary organizations that serve as connectors, coordinators, and capacity-builders—are uniquely positioned to drive this process. By weaving together resources, voices, and expertise, these Hubs strengthen social capital: the trust, relationships, and networks that enable communities to address shared challenges and advance their goals. Increasing social capital, one of the eight capitals in the WealthWorks framework, is an essential asset for equitable rural economic development and is central to building Rural Voice and Power, as emphasized in the Thrive Rural Framework.

Key questions for community leaders and members to assess social capital include:

1. How welcome do people feel in our region?
2. Do residents have the resources they need to participate and thrive?
3. Are local organizations owned or directed regionally and guided by the voices of all stakeholders?

### ***Addressing Systemic Inequities Through Trust-Building***

The history of neglect and inadequate investment when addressing health and well-being in marginalized communities, particularly in rural areas, underscores the importance of trust-building. Communities of color and Native populations in rural America often face systemic barriers to healthcare access, including limited insurance coverage, delayed care, and interpersonal racism, while rural health systems struggle with chronic underfunding and structural challenges. Rural Development Hubs can help overcome these barriers by prioritizing trust-building strategies that acknowledge and value these communities’ lived experiences, cultures, and histories.

### ***Trust as a Foundation for Sustainable Progress***

Trust enables collaboration and sets the stage for transformative, community-led action. Rural Development Hubs excel at building this trust by facilitating collaboration among a broad range of sectors critical to health and well-being and serving as intermediaries that respect local wisdom and align development efforts with community-defined priorities. For instance:



**Principle 1:**

Rural Development Hubs are key to building trusting relationships across sectors and aligning regional well-being.

- **Language Matters:** Hubs can ensure that the language used in engagement processes is affirming and avoids deficit-based descriptions of rural challenges. By focusing on community strengths and aspirations, they foster hope and momentum.
- **Building Leadership Pipelines:** Through trust-building, Hubs empower communities to cultivate effective local leaders who can sustain long-term development efforts.

Trust also promotes reciprocity, where shared benefits and mutual respect create a sense of collective purpose. Rural Development Hubs are uniquely equipped to nurture these reciprocal relationships, which are foundational to overcoming systemic challenges and advancing well-being and economic resilience.

Hubs also encourage government and philanthropic stakeholders to invest in trust-building activities, emphasizing that traditional funding sources often fail to prioritize social capital development. Hubs create the conditions for sustainable, community-driven progress by aligning partnerships around shared well-being goals.

Practitioners looking to build trust in communities may benefit from taking a “lead from behind” approach. This means first understanding what’s already happening within the community, establishing relationships, and gaining a deeper understanding of community values around health and well-being.

### *A Call to Fund and Support Rural Development Hubs*

TRALE participants underscored the need for government and philanthropy to explicitly fund trust-building and capacity-building work. Rural Development Hubs provide the necessary structure and expertise to bridge divides, mobilize resources, and enable communities to lead their own development. Supporting these Hubs is not just an investment in social capital—it’s a critical step toward addressing systemic inequities and fostering equitable, community-led solutions that promote health, well-being, and transformative economic prosperity.



**Principle 1:**

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**CASE STUDY: EARNING AND NURTURING TRUST**

The ProMedica Adrian Ebeid Neighborhood Promise, located in the eastern corridor of Adrian, Michigan, was established through a multisector partnership to address the social determinants of health for approximately 11,000 residents. In this community, roughly 30% of the population lives at or below the poverty level. The initiative's on-the-ground team of four focuses on building and sustaining trust within the community.

In 2022, the team launched community planning sessions that centered on health, employment and financial stability, housing, and education. These sessions aimed to identify community priorities and the outcomes residents hoped to achieve. One tangible result has been the co-location of services—tailored to the community's expressed needs—in a local public school. By embedding programming in this trusted and accessible space, the initiative has strengthened connections with residents and enhanced service delivery.

**A key takeaway from this effort is that trust must be actively earned and nurtured.** The historical mistreatment or neglect of lower-income communities by healthcare systems has left deep wounds, making it essential to approach this work with sensitivity and a commitment to healing. This recognition has shaped ProMedica's approach, emphasizing partnership with the community to identify opportunities and prioritize their needs collaboratively. By centering the community's voice and fostering shared decision-making, the initiative aims to build sustainable solutions that advance health and well-being.



"Authenticity around relationships, the only way you can get there is through engagement. It might not be pretty. There's not a right language, it's about creating space where we can work it out and build trust."



**Nicole Manapol**  
IEDC, New York

"As practitioners, we can get transactional in terms of our relationships with community members. If we are approaching our work as a long-term relationship, we need to expect that people will step up and step back... don't cut them out as they step back. It's important to understand that life ebbs and flows. Keep the door open for people."



**Stephanie Tyree**  
West Virginia Community  
Development Hub, West Virginia

"Partnerships are needed, safe spaces where people come together - updating, educating, telling stories, focusing on different parts of innovative projects we're working on. This is something that has come out of us being a coalition and being coalition-driven. Start small. We started meeting not just for money. This will help with systems change, giving us a voice, being a part of these panels, and participating in this."



**Angie Main**  
NACDC Financial Services, Montana

"For practitioners, continue to cross-pollinate with each other. We need to have conversations with each other and create a community of learning."



**Alton Perry**  
Roanoke Electric Cooperative,  
North Carolina



**Principle 1:**

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**CASE STUDY: COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO RURAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING**

The Iowa Rural Vitality Coalition, a partnership involving government, education, and for-profit sectors, exemplifies how pooling resources can lead to sustainable solutions for health and well-being in rural communities. By leveraging the Comprehensive Rural Wealth Framework from RUPRI, the coalition selected two pilot communities, Manchester and Van Buren County, to develop strategic plans focused on improving the local economy and the health of their residents.

The coalition initiated its work with assessments, strategic planning, and the formation of community-based wealth capital groups. These groups, composed of volunteers with diverse demographics and perspectives, ensure that plans are rooted in local priorities and assets. The approach highlights the importance of harnessing multiple forms of capital—social, cultural, and economic—to advance long-term community goals.



Van Buren County embraced a vision of vibrant streets filled with bustling sidewalks, outdoor dining, and events. In line with this, residents prioritized the creation of an entertainment venue that has since evolved into a cultural hub, energizing the area's social and economic activity.

Manchester County focused on addressing economic and workforce challenges by targeting empty storefronts, workforce retention, and housing improvements, laying the groundwork for a revitalized and sustainable local economy.

Wellmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield, a key coalition partner, emphasized the importance of addressing social determinants of health. Sharing that “80% of factors influencing health occur outside the healthcare system”, Wellmark is committed to investing in upstream initiatives—such as community development and preventive efforts—that reduce long-term health-care needs. This approach highlights the intersection between economic development and health, aligning with the coalition's belief that improving a community's physical and economic environments is foundational to its residents' well-being.

“Building relationships and meeting before a great opportunity. Often, there's a rush for people to come together for a funding opportunity, so there is no trust with organizations and people. The ability to say we've been meeting, talking. We know each other. We're doing this with or without the grant funding, is really important.”



**Shalyn Hawley,**  
Four Bands Community Fund Inc.,  
South Dakota

“If you're serious about working in these communities and building equity, then you have to realize that these communities are not less than. It is not an issue of our communities being less than. It's historical lack of access and equity. We wear it, and we live it. Someone else has to own it. You can have more equitable processes if you want to.”



**Ebonie Alexander,**  
Black Land Family Trust, Virginia



**Principle 1:**

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## Recommendations

### Philanthropy

- **Invest in Rural Development Hubs:** Provide multi-year (ongoing) funding for Rural Development Hubs as intermediaries to build trust between communities and external entities, including funders and government agencies. Hubs serve as connectors, ensuring that external resources align with local needs and aspirations.
- **Understand the Community:** Dedicate time to understanding rural communities' unique identity, operational dynamics, and aspirations. Tailor investments to reflect the specific cultural and contextual needs of each region.
- **Support Trust-Building for Well-Being:** Allocate resources to trust-building processes that strengthen health and well-being in rural regions. Focus on inclusive, community-driven approaches that center equity and empowerment.
- **Fund Coalition Building for Community Development:** Provide resources to support coalitions working on community development initiatives. Center these efforts on metrics that measure community well-being alongside traditional economic indicators.
- **Align Partnerships Around Well-Being Goals:** Encourage and fund activities that build trust and align cross-sector partnerships with shared well-being objectives. These efforts can include collaborative convenings, participatory planning sessions, and technical support for local organizations.

### Government

- **Collaborative Data Collection and Assessment:** Build community capacity by engaging residents and local organizations in collaborative assessment and data collection efforts. Use these processes to identify community strengths and needs.
- **Incentivize Regional Solutions:** Encourage counties and regional organizations to address challenges at the intersection of economic development and health. Offer funding and technical support for innovative regional strategies.
- **Promote Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Foster partnerships between government agencies, philanthropy, and practitioners. Prioritize trust-building and shared metrics of success as a foundation for sustainable collaboration.
- **Fund Capacity and Transactional Efforts:** Invest in both capacity-building initiatives (e.g., leadership development, organizational support) and transactional funding opportunities (e.g., grants for specific projects).
- **Support Rural Social and Civic Infrastructure:** Strengthen rural areas' social and civic infrastructure by investing in Rural Development Hubs and other organizations that foster trust and collaboration.

### Practitioners

- **Lead Local Conversations:** Drive local discussions to inspire action among community leaders. Encourage them to act as early investors and model the engagement needed to attract broader support.
- **Hire Value Chain Coordinators:** Employ a [Value Chain Coordinator](#) to maintain local networks, build relationships, and connect resources. These roles are crucial for sustaining collaboration and advancing shared goals.



caption caption



## 2

**Principle 2:**

Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.

**Community Capacity** refers to the collective influence of a community's commitment, resources, and skills that can be harnessed to address challenges and leverage opportunities. Building this capacity in rural and Indigenous communities is essential to aligning health and economic development efforts, which are often treated as separate domains despite their interconnectedness.

### *Challenges and Opportunities in Building Capacity*

Rural regions have struggled with a lack of access to sustained, capacity-building funding for decades. Instead, most support has been transactional and episodic, aimed at specific projects with narrow foci and shorter-term objectives rather than longer-term and more holistic goals. This has made building capacity in rural regions very difficult, as available funding does not allow it to be addressed. This has led to a significant “community capacity gap” that makes any kind of governmental funding difficult to apply for, match, or manage.

This gap was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and the distribution of federal funding. While significant resources became available, many rural and Indigenous communities lacked the organizational infrastructure to navigate complex application processes or coordinate regional efforts to access these funds.

Community leadership in these regions is often volunteer-driven or managed by part-time staff whose responsibilities limit their capacity to engage in the strategic activities necessary for collaborative projects. Despite these constraints, rural leaders possess the drive and local knowledge to make meaningful change. However, they require support to strengthen their skills, networks, and access to resources.

This ultimately means having more staff members to do the work. When community leaders say they don't have the capacity, it's not just that their organization doesn't have the necessary staff; it's also that the region doesn't have enough to do the research, organizing, coalition-building, trust development, planning, etc. required to bring community-led investment proposals forward.

**“Practitioners should lead from behind. Don't assume nothing's happening. Build relationships, map the field, and partner with community leaders as whole people. Support their growth and invest in ongoing leadership development—when you do, interesting things happen.”**



**Stephanie Tyree**

West Virginia Community Development Hub, West Virginia

**“Who is there, and who is not. How are we recruiting our teams to connect with those other networks? Invite them to the table, we say that all the time. Yet, we ask the same people over and over - the traditional leadership. Rarely do we invite regular people, who are intimidated by open forums. They've never been invited. So how can we make them fun? Simplicity, people appreciate this. Simple things for them to be engaged and share their opinion. Being accepting of difference.**



**Shane Barton**

University of Kentucky Community and Economic Development Initiative of KY, Kentucky



**Principle 2:**

Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.

### *The Connection Between Capacity and Cross-Sector Alignment*

TRALE participants consistently emphasized that building regional and organizational capacity is key to bridging the gap between health and economic development. When community leaders have the necessary skills and resources, they are better equipped to convene stakeholders across sectors, facilitate trust-building, and identify solutions that address systemic challenges at the intersection of health and economic well-being.

For example, aligning these fields requires leaders to understand how social determinants of health—such as housing, employment, and education—directly impact economic and health outcomes. Leaders with the capacity to see and act on these connections can create strategies that leverage investments in economic development to improve health and vice versa.

### *Strategies for Increasing Capacity*

Building leadership teams that reflect the community's demographics requires intentionality. This means identifying who is currently engaged and who is missing from decision-making tables. Offering simple, low-barrier opportunities for underrepresented groups to participate is a foundational step. Over time, these individuals can take on larger roles as they build confidence and see the tangible value of their contributions.

Research from Aspen CSG, including the [Measuring Community Capacity Building Workbook](#) and [Better Results: What does it take to build capacity in rural and Native nations communities?](#), highlights the importance of building trust over time. This approach requires funders and practitioners to “walk with” communities, supporting their locally defined goals rather than imposing external agendas.

Investing in training programs, mentorship, and peer learning opportunities for rural leaders can significantly enhance their ability to align health and development fields. Regional partnerships, such as those facilitated by Rural Development Hubs, play a critical role in fostering leadership capacity by offering technical assistance, facilitating cross-sector collaboration, and providing access to funding opportunities.

*“Philanthropy should be hiring program officers within the communities they serve. And making the process of working with them easier, through, for example, a common app for funding or allowing for video submission as opposed to written proposals.”*



**Mark Gabriel Little,**  
NCGrowth, UNC Chapel Hill,  
North Carolina

*“For practitioners, use a common sense gut-check (the grandma principle) - for those who are interacting with folks in the community that are at all levels of education, literacy, numeracy.”*



**Ines Polonius,**  
Communities Unlimited,  
Arkansas

*“Practitioners, government, and philanthropy should challenge the traditional concepts of economic development. We need an ecosystem approach, not siloing issues because they are all interconnected.”*



**Vanessa Roanhorse,**  
Roanhorse Consulting, New Mexico

*“Don’t design for us without us. It hasn’t worked. Go to the people when developing program ideas. Design the program with what will work. If you design with community at the table, then the outcomes in the community can come to fruition because you put people at the table who know.”*



**Shalyn Hawley,**  
Four Bands Community Fund Inc.,  
South Dakota



**Principle 2:**

Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.

**AMPLIFYING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND NETWORKS**

Center Native is a platform designed to spotlight and encourage investment in Native-led initiatives in New Mexico and the Navajo Nation. The initiative underscores the importance of Indigenous network relationships and cultural wisdom in driving equitable development. Vanessa Roanhorse, a key advocate of the platform, explains: “It’s one example of how we’re trying to figure out how to center Indigenous network relationships and wisdom, ideally connecting them to the diverse types of capital.”

Center Native leverages EcoMap, a digital platform that collects, curates, and continuously updates information about the real-life ecosystems within Native communities. This includes details about people, places, organizations, and resources that are essential to these networks. By using technology as a bridge, Center Native amplifies Indigenous knowledge, making it more accessible while respecting its context.

The platform highlights the importance of integrating Indigenous wisdom with various forms of community capital—financial, social, cultural, and more. In doing so, it fosters collaboration across sectors, creating opportunities for investment and growth that align with community-defined priorities. It is also a powerful example of how modern tools can complement traditional knowledge to drive holistic, community-led progress.

**COMMUNITY CHANGE GRANTS**

The EPA Environmental and Climate Justice Program’s Community Change Grants are designed to support disadvantaged communities in addressing environmental and climate justice challenges, including building community capacity for sustained engagement with environmental and climate justice issues.

In a notable shift, the EPA has prioritized funding community-based organizations (CBOs) over traditional recipients like government agencies or large nonprofits. Recognizing that many CBOs lack the resources or expertise to navigate complex federal grant processes, the EPA is investing heavily in technical assistance (TA) to ensure more equitable access to funding opportunities.

Through the Inflation Reduction Act, the EPA received \$200 million specifically for TA initiatives. A portion of this funding was allocated to EnDyna, a firm contracted to provide comprehensive support for potential grantees. The goal is to empower community organizations by equipping them with the skills and tools needed to apply for and manage federal funding.

By embedding TA into the grantmaking process, the EPA is addressing systemic inequities in access to federal funding. This model facilitates broader participation from underrepresented communities and builds long-term capacity for local leadership and resilience.

This initiative exemplifies how government agencies can reimagine traditional funding processes to align more closely with the needs of historically marginalized communities.

**Principle 2:**

Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.



## BUILDING HEALTH AND EQUITY THROUGH RURAL COMMUNITY CAPACITY

Del Norte County, located in Northern California, is home to the Yurok and Tolowa people. Despite its ecological and cultural richness, the county ranks among the lowest in the state for per-capita income. In response to disparities like these, The California Endowment selected Del Norte, along with the Yurok and Tolowa Dee-ni' Tribal lands, as one of 14 communities for its Building Healthy Communities initiative. This 10-year project aims to improve health outcomes in California's most marginalized regions.

Wild Rivers Community Foundation (WRCF), an affiliate of the Humboldt Area Foundation, was chosen as the regional backbone or "Hub" organization to manage the initiative. WRCF's role has been crucial in growing local leadership and facilitating collaboration among a diverse set of stakeholders, including residents, youth, government agencies, nonprofits, and community partners. Together, they've tackled complex systemic challenges, particularly around health equity.

A central part of WRCF's efforts has been capacity building—offering technical assistance (TA) and fostering community-driven initiatives. This work culminated in a leadership development program designed to empower community members to transform systems for greater racial and health equity. The initiative has seen positive outcomes, including improvements in early childhood education, college and career readiness, access to local healthy foods, youth leadership, entrepreneurship, and overall community health rankings.

By leveraging the power of local collaboration and focusing on sustainable leadership, WRCF has played a pivotal role in improving health outcomes and building a stronger, more resilient community in Del Norte County.

**"To tackle big challenges, we need to build solidarity. Much of my work now focuses on creating spaces where rural, Latinx, and tribal communities can share common struggles and find connection. Building spaces where these exchanges can happen will help shift public perception by showing how similar the issues really are."**



**Manuel Machado,**  
Oregon State University Extension  
Service, Oregon

**"When communities lead regional solutions, they have the ability develop the infrastructure that supports their needs. Regionalization efforts led by communities usually yield beautiful and long-lasting results."**



**Olga Morales-Pate,**  
RCAP, New Mexico/Washington, DC





## Principle 2:

Rural and Indigenous community leaders need sufficient capacity to align health and economic development effectively.

# Recommendations

Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Invest in Rural Development Hubs:</b> Provide flexible funding to Rural Development Hubs to enhance regional capacity through training and staff expansion.</li> <li>• <b>Diversify Leadership Structures:</b> Expand representation by establishing advisory boards that include rural community leaders within the service area.</li> <li>• <b>Engage Locally:</b> Build relationships with rural communities by engaging directly on the ground and learning their unique needs and strengths.</li> <li>• <b>Hire Rural Talent:</b> Prioritize hiring staff from rural areas within the service region to strengthen community connections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promote Inclusive Leadership in Grantmaking:</b> Require diverse and inclusive leadership teams for grant recipients to promote place, race, and class equity in decision-making.</li> <li>• <b>Model Shared Power:</b> Actively demonstrate shared power in funding decisions and resource allocation to foster trust and equity.</li> <li>• <b>Encourage Regional Collaboration:</b> Incentivize initiatives that focus on cross-regional partnerships, inclusive leadership development, and mentoring programs.</li> </ul>
Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Start Small and Build:</b> Focus on engaging a few committed individuals to lay the foundation for broader participation, with clear, mutually agreed outcomes.</li> <li>• <b>Accommodate Varied Skill Levels:</b> Ensure that engagement efforts include individuals with differing literacy, numeracy, and education levels.</li> <li>• <b>Facilitate Engagement Spaces:</b> Create physical and virtual spaces where community members can come together for productive discussions and decision-making.</li> <li>• <b>Align Vision and Track Progress:</b> Develop a shared vision within the community and document progress toward mutual goals.</li> <li>• <b>Adopt Consensus-Based Decision-Making:</b> Build trust and collective ownership through decision-making processes that prioritize consensus.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Redefine Leadership:</b> Expand community understanding of leadership by highlighting diverse forms and paths to leadership.</li> <li>• <b>Create Leadership Pathways:</b> Develop accessible on-ramps for community members to engage in leadership and participation opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Highlight Non-Traditional Entrepreneurs:</b> Identify and elevate entrepreneurs who create momentum within rural communities, recognizing their unique contributions.</li> <li>• <b>Involve Funders in Community Work:</b> Encourage funders to engage directly in on-the-ground work, building mutual understanding and trust.</li> </ul>
Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Invest in Rural Development Hubs:</b> Provide flexible funding to Rural Development Hubs to enhance regional capacity through training and staff expansion.</li> <li>• <b>Build Leadership Capacity:</b> Invest in capacity-building initiatives for leaders in rural and Indigenous communities, supporting long-term sustainability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Provide Flexible Funding Mechanisms:</b> Design funding structures that allow communities to use resources in ways that meet their unique needs.</li> <li>• <b>Support Leadership Development:</b> Fund programs focused on leadership development through mentorship and other skill-building initiatives.</li> </ul>





## 3

**Principle 3:**

Local wealth building is vital for Community Development Organizations to build and retain personal assets and community wealth.

## Building individual assets is essential to centering health and well-being for both individuals and communities.

As TRALE participants emphasized, people need a foundation of stability—such as access to housing, food, and employment—before they can actively participate in broader conversations about health, development, and well-being. This focus on individual asset building doesn't mean solely targeting one person at a time. It also includes strategies that retain wealth locally and prevent displacement, such as shared equity and ownership models tailored to rural contexts.

### What Does Asset Building Mean?

Asset building focuses on strengthening intellectual, individual, and social capitals. While it begins with ensuring that basic needs are met, it also encompasses financial wellness, entrepreneurial support, youth development, and interpersonal skills. For example, a homeownership counseling program might incorporate financial planning and healthcare assistance, recognizing that an individual's well-being directly impacts their ability to maintain and grow assets.

### Balancing Personal and Community Wealth Strategies

While individual and family-focused strategies are vital, they should align with broader community wealth-building initiatives as well as anti-displacement objectives. For example:

- **Homeownership:** [Community land trusts](#) ensure long-term affordability by keeping housing assets within the community. While homeowners might accrue less equity compared to traditional models, this approach maintains affordable opportunities for future generations.
- **Business Development:** [Cooperative](#) and [employee-ownership](#) models allow for shared wealth and stability, ensuring businesses remain community-rooted, even after founders retire.

### Understanding Needs and Leveraging Partners

The first step in crafting effective strategies is understanding the baseline needs of low- and moderate-income individuals in the region. Community development organizations—such as [CDFIs](#), [CDCs](#), [Community Action Agencies](#), [county](#), [city](#), or [Tribal government entities](#), [housing-specific developers](#), and [regional development districts](#)—are key partners. In rural areas, these organizations often play multiple roles, addressing various socio-economic and cultural challenges to improve quality of life.

"When I'm in community, I'm listening. I'm trying to figure out what those interpersonal relationships might look like and the structures of power in a community. Equitable development really relies on access to power, access to influence, access to ownership."



**Carrie Kissel,**  
NADO, Washington, DC

"If we support people to invest (through information and opportunities), we can build intergenerational wealth; and if we can build intergenerational wealth, community leadership will be more diverse."



**Stephanie Tyree,**  
West Virginia Community  
Development Hub, West Virginia

**Principle 3:**

Local wealth building is vital for Community Development Organizations to build and retain personal assets and community wealth.

*Achieving Sustainable Asset Building*

The ultimate goal is to create conditions where community members can stay, participate, and thrive. Sustainable asset-building strategies yield individual, neighborhood, and community benefits. However, these efforts require flexible and diverse financial resources and significant time and energy for facilitation and support.

This work also requires education, protection, and advocacy to prevent exploitation and the stripping of assets from individuals, families, and communities. The [National Community Reinvestment Coalition](#) (NCRC) and The [Indian Land Tenure Foundation](#) (ILTF) work closely with national, state, and local community development organizations on this topic.

This work also necessitates a deeper understanding of cultural histories, past traumas, and lived experiences in rural and Indigenous communities. Building trust and tailoring strategies to honor these contexts ensures effective and respectful interventions, contributing to long-term individual and collective well-being.



"People are not able to go into leadership positions if they're struggling to meet basic needs. These are pathways to creating leadership pipelines."



**Amy Hause,**  
Rural Development Initiatives,  
Pacific Northwest

"What kind of programs provide people with hope for a better future? My favorite kind are matched savings, or IDA, programs, which help people of modest means to buy homes, start or expand businesses, pay for education, pay down debt, or buy vehicles. IDAs empower people to have a future orientation, which is tough to do when you're focused on basic needs."



**Chris Watson,**  
Warm Springs Community Action  
Team, Oregon



**Principle 3:**

Local wealth building is vital for Community Development Organizations to build and retain personal assets and community wealth.

**CASE STUDY: MEETING BASIC NEEDS TO FOSTER DEVELOPMENT**

Rural Development Initiatives (RDI), a nonprofit focused on fostering thriving rural communities in the Pacific Northwest, has been working to strengthen connections and capacity in Cottage Grove, OR. In this community, leaders, schools, and community-based organizations collaborate closely to understand and address the needs of the diverse population, particularly the Latino immigrant community.

Key efforts include creating a Community Resource Directory and introducing a community navigator role designed to help residents access resources in their native language. The navigator also holds regular meetings with the immigrant population to learn firsthand about their challenges and priorities.

According to Brenda Brown, an advocate for the initiative, meeting basic needs is essential for fostering deeper community engagement and laying the groundwork for economic development. She emphasizes, “Before growing as a community through economic development, the community needs to have their basic needs met. This coalition is trying to build that trust by consistently seeking residents’ input and working to understand their needs. By involving residents in problem-solving, the coalition strengthens both trust and solutions.”

This approach demonstrates how community development organizations can serve as critical intermediaries—not just delivering resources but also creating pathways for inclusive participation. Through these efforts, Cottage Grove is building the foundation for economic and social growth that reflects the voices and aspirations of all its residents.

**Recommendations**

Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Balance Individual and Community Needs:</b> Fund initiatives that simultaneously address personal needs (such as housing or financial literacy) and broader community well-being.</li> <li>• <b>Promote Local Small Business and Entrepreneurship:</b> Showcase the economic and social benefits of investing in small businesses and entrepreneurs in rural areas by leveraging case studies from similar regions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Support Risk-Taking for Growth:</b> Provide funding structures that help reduce cultural resistance to debt, enabling entrepreneurs and individuals to take calculated risks.</li> <li>• <b>Invest at the Intersection of Health and Economic Development:</b> Prioritize businesses, individuals, and properties that contribute to both community well-being and economic growth.</li> </ul>
Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Strengthen Entrepreneurial Ecosystems:</b> Allocate resources to develop ecosystems that support small businesses and entrepreneurs, including models for shared ownership in startups and ownership transitions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Facilitate Asset Acquisition:</b> Establish programs like matched savings accounts and investment opportunities to help individuals acquire and build assets over time.</li> </ul>
Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Understand the Scale of Need:</b> Collect and analyze regional and national data to gauge the scope of wealth-building needs in rural communities.</li> <li>• <b>Build Collaborative Networks:</b> Identify and cultivate partnerships across local, regional, state, and national levels to implement strategies that focus on individual and shared wealth-building.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Focus on Asset Development Models:</b> Work on designing and implementing programs that integrate both individual and community-focused asset-building strategies, such as cooperative ownership models or community land trusts.</li> </ul>





## 4

**Principle 4:**

Community well-being metrics are the best measure of holistic development success.

**Typical economic development metrics—such as jobs created and income levels—often fall short of capturing the full story of community well-being because they typically only focus on jobs created, jobs retained, and dollars leveraged.**

Measuring what we value shapes our priorities and ultimately determines outcomes. A holistic strategy ensures that well-being, equity, and community-specific goals are central to development efforts.

Measurement serves three primary purposes:

1. **Reflecting Effectiveness:** Evaluating the impact of programs and strategies.
2. **Educating the Field:** Sharing learnings with peers and stakeholders.
3. **Influencing Decision-Makers:** Providing evidence to guide the actions of policymakers, funders, and agencies.

Here are examples of how you can use WealthWorks capitals to capture metrics that demonstrate well-being and extend beyond traditional economic metrics:

- **Individual Capital:** Improved health and education outcomes.
- **Intellectual Capital:** Increased entrepreneurship and innovation.
- **Social Capital:** Greater diversity in community partnerships and volunteer networks.
- **Cultural Capital:** Expanded opportunities to engage with regional customs and traditions.
- **Natural Capital:** Enhanced preservation and sustainable use of local natural resources.
- **Built Capital:** Growth in regionally owned infrastructure, such as food hubs or arts spaces.
- **Political Capital:** Greater participation from underserved populations in decision-making.
- **Financial Capital:** Increases in living-wage jobs, household incomes, and local business success.

**“We can spew out metrics. We have 1600 landowners holding acres of land. When we talk about true impact, it is very difficult to extract what that looks like in a number. The landowner feels empowered and has been able to grasp a multitude of technical assistance. They’re in local markets. How do you do that without telling the story? With federal agencies, it’s about the metric. You can’t put a number on that.”**



**Alton Perry,**  
Roanoke Electric Cooperative,  
North Carolina

**“The definition of economic development has evolved to include workforce development, for example, but there’s still a lot of complexity around job creation and the development strategies used need to be broader.”**



**Sara Chester,**  
The Industrial Commons,  
North Carolina

**“With philanthropy, grants are evaluated by quantifying everything. There’s also a qualitative side of things that is about more stories than numbers. Consider making the evaluation process more accommodating to those with more flexibility.”**



**Manuel Machado,**  
Oregon State University  
Extension Service, Oregon

**Principle 4:**

Community well-being metrics are the best measure of holistic development success.

Metrics should reflect both current status and disparities between groups, communities, or regions. While quantitative data may be suitable for measuring financial and health outcomes, qualitative data often captures the depth of social and cultural impacts.

**Effective Measurement Practices**

Baseline data collection and regular intervals for follow-up measurement are essential. Systems change is a long-term process, so outcomes may take years to materialize. Combining short-term output data with longer-term outcome tracking ensures that progress is captured comprehensively.

Measurement is also an opportunity to build community connections. Collaboratively determining metrics strengthens relationships and fosters trust. For example, Aspen CSG's [Measure Up](#) report highlights the value of combining quantitative metrics with storytelling to provide richer insights into community outcomes. Storytelling deepens understanding and educates funders about what matters most to rural and Indigenous communities.

**Lessons from TRALE Participants**

TRALE participants emphasized supplementing funder-required metrics with locally meaningful ones, such as qualitative indicators and narratives. This dual approach empowers communities to track what truly matters while educating funders on the unique needs of rural areas. Their advice: *“Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define progress indicators that make local—and mutual—sense.”*

By embracing a broader set of metrics, communities can better align development efforts with well-being, equity, and sustainability.

**“What we were doing wasn’t working, so we looked for new ways to measure that empower people and communities. We’re still learning, and it’s especially hard with state and federal partners who don’t always see the harm caused by extractive systems—of money, culture, and ideas.**

**We now use the WealthWorks capitals in all our measurements and take a flexible, ‘yes, and’ approach to data.”**



**Cheryal Hills,**  
Region Five Development  
Corporation, Minnesota

**“Federal programs still run on outdated systems, including reporting. It’s hard to meet their requirements when we’re not included in the process; invite us to the table. For example, we couldn’t meet the 20% match for RD funding, so they waived match for some of our projects after many meetings and correspondence.**

**We’re using stories and case studies to push for change, but true equity still feels out of reach.”**



**Angie Main,**  
NACDC Financial Services, Montana

**Principle 4:**

Community well-being metrics are the best measure of holistic development success.

## Recommendations

Government	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collaborate to Understand Contexts:</b> Work with grantees and awardees to understand their unique regional and community contexts at the start of projects.</li> <li>• <b>Customize Metrics Together:</b> Co-develop realistic, tailored metrics for tracking progress that align with local priorities and conditions.</li> <li>• <b>Incorporate Community-Driven Metrics:</b> Ask for and learn from optional supplemental metrics proposed by communities to better understand localized impact..</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Eliminate Ineffective Reporting Requirements:</b> Remove data reporting obligations that do not inform project implementation, learning, or measurable outcomes.</li> <li>• <b>Highlight Impact Through Storytelling:</b> Encourage grantees to use storytelling to illustrate how funding directly improves lives, complementing quantitative data.</li> <li>• <b>Embrace Long-Term Measures:</b> Support the use of place-based metrics and prioritize longer-term outcomes that reflect genuine community transformation.</li> </ul>
Philanthropy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Promote Community-Driven Metrics:</b> Support efforts by rural communities, governments, and nonprofits to encourage the adoption of innovative, community-designed metrics.</li> <li>• <b>Simplify Reporting Requirements:</b> Eliminate unnecessary reporting mandates to streamline processes and improve focus on impactful outcomes.</li> <li>• <b>Collaborate on Tailored Metrics:</b> Partner with grantees to create metrics that reflect local priorities, community challenges, and opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Support Storytelling and Convening:</b> Fund convenings and storytelling initiatives to humanize metrics and highlight economic development successes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Encourage Flexible Reporting:</b> Allow grantees to include qualitative data alongside quantitative reporting, adapting processes to meet local needs.</li> <li>• <b>Recognize Non-Quantitative Success:</b> Prioritize storytelling and place-based metrics as measures of progress toward individual and community well-being.</li> <li>• <b>Focus on Long-Term Outcomes:</b> Value metrics that track systemic change over time, understanding that meaningful impact may take years to materialize.</li> </ul>
Practitioners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Advocate for Rural and Indigenous Engagement:</b> Urge governments and philanthropies to involve rural and Native communities in defining meaningful success metrics at the onset of work.</li> <li>• <b>Provide Contextual Data:</b> Share comprehensive information about local and regional dynamics with funders to deepen understanding and build trust.</li> <li>• <b>Negotiate Practical Metrics:</b> Initiate conversations with funders to establish realistic, community-aligned indicators and reporting processes.</li> <li>• <b>Challenge Mismatched Metrics:</b> Push back diplomatically against external metrics that fail to reflect local realities and priorities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Streamline Data Collection:</b> Focus only on collecting data that provides actionable insights for advancing local development goals.</li> <li>• <b>Offer Concrete Examples:</b> Share specific, localized examples of success metrics to illustrate the community's progress and needs.</li> <li>• <b>Tell Stories of Impact:</b> Use storytelling to demonstrate the tangible effects of funding on individuals and communities.</li> <li>• <b>Advocate for Favorable Terms:</b> Work to secure funding agreements that accommodate community-driven priorities and simplify compliance requirements.</li> </ul>

"When that person feels successful, then they say I want to be a decision maker on a county committee. That's the change that takes place by empowering people and listening to their stories. We need to be changing the systems that cause us to measure quantitative measures vs. qualitative."



**Cheryal Hills,**  
Region Five Development  
Corporation, Minnesota

"Collect data together. Then it is hard to say the data point is wrong. Contribute to the real data. Tell stories about the spaces they love and their significance."



**Shane Barton,** University of Kentucky  
Community and Economic Development  
Initiative of KY, Kentucky





## TRALE Participants

**Ebonie Alexander**

Executive Director, Black Land Family Trust, Virginia

**Shane Barton**

Downtown Revitalization Coordinator, University of Kentucky Community and Economic Development Initiative of KY, Kentucky

**Brenda Brown**

Director of Latino Programs, Rural Development Initiatives, Oregon

**Sara Chester**

Co-Executive Director, The Industrial Commons, North Carolina

**Amy Hause**

Director, Rural Development Initiatives, Pacific Northwest

**Shalyn Hawley**

Director of Operations, Four Bands Community Fund Inc., South Dakota

**Cheryal Hills**

Executive Director, Region Five Development Corporation, Minnesota

**Arlene Jones**

Executive Director, Sprout MN, Minnesota

**Carrie Kissel**

Associate Director, NADO Research Foundation, NADO, Washington, DC

**Melissa Levy**

Principal and Owner, Community Roots, Vermont

**Mark Gabriel Little**

Executive Director, NCGrowth, UNC Chapel Hill, North Carolina

**Benito Lubazibwa**

CEO, ReMix Ideas, Arkansas

**Manuel Machado**

Natural Resources Workforce Program Coordinator, Oregon State University Extension Service, Oregon

**Angie Main**

Executive Director, NACDC Financial Services, Montana

**Nicole Manapol**

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**Olga Morales-Pate**

CEO, RCAP, New Mexico/Washington, DC

**Alton Perry**

Director, Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Project, Roanoke Electric Cooperative, North Carolina

**Ines Polonius**

CEO, Communities Unlimited, Arkansas

**Vanessa Roanhorse**

CEO and Owner, Roanhorse Consulting, New Mexico

**Stephanie Tyree**

Executive Director, West Virginia Community Development Hub, West Virginia

**Chris Watson**

Executive Director, Warm Springs Community Action Team, Oregon

## Community Strategies Group



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Since 1985, the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group has worked toward equitable rural prosperity. We support communities and Native nations to become healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.

As a national hub, Aspen CSG connects rural leaders, practitioners, and policymakers to share ideas, strengthen networks, and advance solutions grounded in the [Thrive Rural Framework](#).

Aspen CSG's consultant, Melissa Levy, led the writing process for this report. We are grateful for her contributions.

For more on Aspen CSG,  
see: [www.AspenCSG.org](http://www.AspenCSG.org)