

# WHAT (AND WHO) COUNTS? DEFINING RURAL DEVELOPMENT SUCCESS

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## CONTEXT

What counts as Rural Development Success? This seems at first a straightforward question, but it becomes much more complicated when a follow-up question is asked: *For Whom?*

Rural people want the same things city people want – safety and security, a sense of community and belonging, good and stable employment with benefits, affordable and good quality housing, healthcare, education, and so on. That said, those exist in different measure in different places. So, it stands to reason that the people living and working in any community are in the best position to determine which of those qualities most need to be improved, taking into consideration local factors such as culture, geography, institutional capacity, and the range of assets they have to build on. In other words, they should be able to define what success means to them.

However, those who provide funding and invest in rural people, places, and initiatives – whether government, philanthropy, or corporations – tend to define success in terms of their own priorities. This can mean imposing “success criteria” that are appropriate for metropolitan areas but have less relevance for rural regions and families. For example, seeking outcomes in terms of *raw numbers* of jobs, services provided, or customers served will always favor higher density cities over rural areas. Moreover, decisions that may make strategic or operational sense to a government agency or a private corporation – perhaps to reduce cost, increase profit, or open new economic opportunities – may have long-term, negative consequences for rural communities that lose a hospital, source of employment, or quality of life.

Thus, the question *For Whom?* raises others: Who decides what success looks like? Who is at the table when plans are drawn, priorities determined, and resources allocated? Read on as four well-respected rural development practitioners and thinkers share their distinct perspectives.

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Shanna Ratner, author of *Wealth Creation: A New Framework for Rural Economic and Community Development* and creator of *You Get What You Measure*, a values-based process that helps diverse groups measure progress toward shared goals, approaches the question through the lens of wealth creation, and related value chains and market-based investments that build integrated and inclusive economies.

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Ines Polonius, the CEO of Communities Unlimited, a rural development hub serving the rural South, argues for adopting the principles of Community-Centered Measurement as the way into measuring rural success.

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Mark Little, Co-Chair of Black Communities: A Conference for Collaboration, and executive director of CREATE, takes an unflinching view of the legacies of power in rural America and how increasing financial and political power is the route to rural indigenous, Latino, and Black communities being able to achieve success on their own terms.

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Anita Brown-Graham, professor and director of nclIMPACT, draws on her work with rural North Carolina communities to identify the key ingredients for successful development.



## MEASURES THAT MATTER AND MOTIVATE: WEALTH CREATION, INCLUSION, RESILIENCE – AND LEARNING



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Shanna Ratner is the Principal of Yellow Wood Associates ([www.yellowwood.org](http://www.yellowwood.org)), consultants in rural economic and community development since 1985. She is the author of *Wealth Creation: A New Framework for Rural Economic and Community Development* (Routledge, 2020) and creator of You Get What You Measure®, a values-based approach to measuring for social change that helps diverse groups of stakeholders understand, focus in on, and make progress toward shared goals. Her new book, forthcoming, is *Progress You Can See: Measuring for Social Change*.

As we seek to create a more inclusive and resilient economy, restructured to favor investment over consumption and resource repair and revitalization over human and natural resource exploitation, we are driven to revalue the contributions of rural areas to the larger regions of which they are part. This means re-examining the ties between urban and rural with an eye toward turning existing systems that exploit rural for the benefit of urban into systems that are reciprocal and mutually beneficial. This is not just a “nice” idea; if we do not take this challenge seriously, we run the very real risk of losing the population base, connectivity, environmental quality, and infrastructure that rural areas must have to continue to contribute to the well-being of all communities. Rural success depends on this realignment.

One practical and applied framework for achieving realignment, economic inclusivity, and resilience at a regional scale is the wealth creation framework.<sup>1</sup> Wealth-creation value chains, organized in and across specific sectors within regions (think manufacturing, food systems, forestry and wood products, tourism, housing, healthcare, etc.), build bridges between community and economic development by intentionally integrating economically marginalized people and places into the mainstream regional economy as business owners, employees, investors, and consumers. The broad intent of the wealth-creation framework is to build integrated and inclusive regional economies that recognize and reward the contributions of rural – not through subsidies, but through market-driven investment that serves the interests of demand and supply partners equitably.

In some rural communities, the economically marginalized are Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, Latinx and other people of color; in others they are “white.” In all cases, a myriad of factors – including, but not limited to, public policies, economic dislocations like factory closings, generational poverty, substandard education and health care, and employment discrimination – have left rural marginalized populations and places economically isolated and excluded from adequately compensated participation in the mainstream economy.

### So, how do we know if we are making rural development progress?

The first question is, “Who is ‘we’?” All too often, “we” is the funder, not the participants on the ground. The funder establishes the measures, generally with the intent of ensuring the accountability of the funding recipient. The funding recipient must siphon resources away from the work at hand to meet the demands of the funder. This devalues local efforts, disempowers participants, and redirects attention away from the goal of improved conditions toward the needs of outsiders. It is inherently extractive. It weakens local capacity to experiment, learn, and make changes in real time on the ground. Effectiveness is all about intentionality, and intentionality is all about where we focus our attention. Measures are a tool to help us focus on achieving what we desire. Properly employed, measures are tied to the goals of the people engaged in the work itself and improve their focus on the ends that matter to them, not to an outsider.

Purposeful measurement begins with clearly stated goals. What are the conditions that participants seek to engender on the ground? Within the wealth-creation framework this becomes, “What does a fully functioning wealth-creation value chain in a given sector look like?” The answer to this question points to the goal or the conditions that define success. The answer explicitly includes the desired impact of the value chain on each of the eight forms of wealth (see box on page 3) as well as on the larger system of policies, norms, and expectations in which value chains operate (e.g., the cultural climate). The specifics of the goal need to be determined by local people at the local level in the context of local conditions and local assets.<sup>2</sup>



## WEALTH: THE EIGHT CAPITALS

### INDIVIDUAL

The existing stock of skills, understanding, physical health, and mental wellness in a region's people.

### INTELLECTUAL

The existing stock of knowledge, resourcefulness, creativity, and innovation in a region's people, institutions, organizations, and sectors.

### SOCIAL

The existing stock of trust, relationships, and networks in a region's population.

### CULTURAL

The existing stock of traditions, customs, ways of doing, and world views in a region's population.

### NATURAL

The existing stock of natural resources – for example, water, land, air, plants, and animals – in a region's places.

### BUILT

The existing stock of constructed infrastructure – for example, buildings, sewer systems, broadband, roads – in a region's places.

### POLITICAL

The existing stock of goodwill, influence, and power that people, organizations, and institutions in the region can exercise in decision-making.

### FINANCIAL

The existing stock of monetary resources available in the region for investment in the region.

The key to measuring for progress rather than accountability is to use measures and measurement systems that benefit the participants in the work. For example, many food system-related value chains seek to engage BIPOC and other under-resourced farmers. Yet the measures used to calculate progress, such as the amount of food that flows through the chain overall, may do little to help farmers improve their own practices. Many low-wealth farmers could benefit from simple systems that give them a better handle on the costs of production, including their own labor, in relation to the returns. By helping farmers integrate appropriate measures into their own enterprises, they gain the information they need to improve. That information can also be requested to inform the progress of the entire value chain with little additional effort or cost. Farmers can learn from each other about ways to contain costs, improve crop quality and retain a larger share of earnings. Farmers can also benefit from learning how to measure (or partner with others to measure) environmental improvements, whether in soil or water or other quality, as a basis for inducing investment. Similar examples are widespread for all the partners who participate in the production process in any wealth-creation value chain, regardless of sector. Refocusing measures on those things that producers need to know to improve their own practices changes the entire nature of the measurement process and drives improvement much closer to the ground.

Value chains built using the wealth-creation framework intentionally measure progress in improving and/or increasing the stocks of all relevant forms of wealth, beginning with baselines that understand current conditions in local context. New knowledge is gained as baselines are revealed. False and limiting assumptions fall away. Participants begin to see which types of actions and actors will – and will not – lead to positive changes in the system in which they find themselves. They also begin to see areas where the system itself must be changed to address specific gaps and bottlenecks and to bring into play underutilized resources – as well as the types of partners they must engage to bring those changes about.



*By transforming our approach to measurement so that the very act of measuring helps producers improve the way they produce (and consumers improve the way they consume), we will move away from measurement as a tool for establishing accountability to funders to measurement as a tool for learning how to do better on the ground.*



**Relationships built around self-interests and shared interests can move mountains.**

Commitment to addressing all the gaps and bottlenecks while finding ways to do business that both build multiple stocks of wealth and do no harm to others leads to many new and unprecedented conversations. These conversations can lead to new relationships – relationships that cross the damaging class, race, ethnic, and other boundaries that keep far too many people isolated from economic opportunity and in poverty. Relationships built around self-interests and shared interests can move mountains. There is no need for everyone in a wealth creation value chain to agree or share the same values; it is enough that they recognize the benefits to themselves of helping other partners succeed.

**By changing the focus of economic progress from job creation to wealth creation and from individual business development or industry clusters to wealth-creation value chains as the fundamental unit of economic activity, we can elevate the value of rural within regions and restructure the ways in which that value is rewarded.** By adopting the wealth-creation framework, we provide a way to integrate instead of silo the expertise of professionals across a wide range of disciplines, from biotechnology to public health, from transportation to education. By transforming our approach to measurement so that the very act of measuring helps producers improve the way they produce (and consumers improve the way they consume), we will move away from measurement as a tool for establishing accountability to funders to measurement as a tool for learning how to do better on the ground. We will shift our focus as we redefine “success”, and we will accelerate the pace of positive adaptations. We will learn how to make better use of existing technologies and pinpoint the need for new technologies and investments that will change the way we produce and consume, so that the very acts of production and consumption strengthen rather than destroy the people, infrastructure, and resources upon which healthy rural and urban communities depend.

## NEEDED AT THE CENTER: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN MEASUREMENT



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Ines Polonius is CEO of Communities Unlimited, a CDFI and rural development hub in the rural South. In 1998, Ms. Polonius founded alt.Consulting, dedicated to growing rural businesses until a successful merger with Community Resource Group in 2014 formed Communities Unlimited. Communities Unlimited (CU)'s team of 70 professionals works in the solutions space, providing a holistic approach to community economic development that includes direct assistance and capital to water/wastewater systems, community leadership teams, micro-enterprises, and small businesses in persistently poor rural places across Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Tennessee.

Measuring the efficacy of philanthropic and federal investment has become big business. Investors equate numbers with success – jobs created, dollars leveraged, people trained, kids fed. Naturally, the bigger the number, the greater the success. Right??? A blind focus on quantitative success measures naturally leads to the ever-elusive quest for “scale,” which is easier to achieve in denser, more urban areas where more people can be reached with less effort and investment. If we get what we measure, then it is no surprise that, from 2010-2014, grant-making in persistently poor rural places averaged \$50 per person, while it ranged between about \$2,000 to over \$4,000 per person in New York City and San Francisco.<sup>3</sup>

Community economic development has been compared to throwing a rock into a lake, creating ripples over time. Investments in urban places address specific challenges, are most often project-focused, and lend themselves to measuring success in numbers. But if you have ever actually tossed a rock into a lake, you may notice that those ripples don't reach the far shore. If, however, you drop a pebble into a puddle, the ripples



quickly reach the edge of the puddle and transform its shape.<sup>4</sup> The same holds true for investing in and measuring success in rural communities. Strategic investments in rural places have the potential of transforming entire communities.

Measuring rural success correctly, especially in areas of concentrated poverty and in predominantly BIPOC communities, can help that pebble drop and ripple. But to do so, it requires what I call “Community-Centered Measurement,” which follows these principles:

- **Locally Defined Progress.** People living and working in the rural community or region need to define the measures that indicate progress – and communities need to be measured against themselves, not against urban or micropolitan benchmarks.
- **Equity Participation.** Residents of diverse backgrounds – across race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, income, and ability – must be involved in that defining.
- **Unique to Place and Context.** Success must be measured differently from one rural place to the next, with local agreement on clear markers over the short- and medium-term that indicate progress.
- **Relativity.** Let’s go back to the pebble transforming the puddle. Only *relative quantitative measures* – like percent increases or decreases from a baseline – are helpful when measuring rural success: for example, jobs created in relation to the size of the local labor market, children fed in relation to local school population, and additional sales taxes generated in relation to local public budget.

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With these principles of Community-Centered Measurement in mind, the following three interlocking outcomes are best used to measure transformational change that leads to a thriving rural community.

**1 Quality of Life.** Long-term improvement in quality of life can lead to the arrival of new residents, the return of individuals who grew up in the community, stabilizing or growing population figures especially among the younger generation, and the attraction of small businesses and eventually even large job creators. The short-term markers may include the availability of new products and services delivered by locally owned businesses, affordable housing, or the conversion of vacant properties into productive space, pocket parks, and community gardens. One medium-term marker may be a qualitative measure related to a newly won sense of pride in the community.

**2 Mindset Shift.** How do we best measure hope? Rural places that rely solely on their part-time mayor and council to move their community forward often wait for a knight in shining armor to save them. Instead, the shift from despair and loss of the “good old days” to an opportunity-seeking mindset across local government, the business community, schools, and families indicates that long-term transformation has occurred. This qualitative measure is often more palpable for outsiders – but it can also be ascertained through pre-and-post interviews with residents.

A short-term marker of that mindset shift is the willingness of residents to volunteer and step into community leadership roles. A diverse leadership team must plan but also implement strategies to create new momentum and personal agency to effect change. Local leadership teams become the on-ramp for investments and resources which can be measured as a further sign of momentum. Medium markers that measure momentum may include improvements to the downtown, new business start-ups, expansion of an existing business, house renovations – improvements resulting not from the intervention of an intermediary or even the leadership team, but rather from the mindset shift within the larger local population turning into self-generated action.



**3 Economic Activity.** For a community to thrive, long-term transformation leads to local economic activity that supports the livelihoods of all residents and services provided by local government. Here the national WealthWorks model provides proven measures.<sup>5</sup> Supporting a local leadership team in assessing local assets based on individual, intellectual, social, built, natural, cultural, political, and financial capitals – and using the same to measure change over time – provides important markers along the way. Some of these eight WealthWorks capitals can be measured quantitatively, others qualitatively. Utilizing these eight forms of capital for measurement ensures that the strategies implemented also balance economic, social, and environmental progress while doing no harm to any one of the eight capitals (or assets) in the community.

## DeWITT DOES IT.

In 2011, the City of DeWitt, Arkansas lost 400 jobs when a shoe manufacturer closed its doors. The city had a shrinking population of 3,200 people with 24 percent living in poverty and 8.5 percent unemployed. Almost every store front in the beautiful courthouse square was boarded up. The transformation in DeWitt began when Communities Unlimited (CU), a rural development hub<sup>6</sup> that combines a community development financial institution (CDFI) with a community development organization, worked with DeWitt's first leadership action team to launch a biofuel value chain. The team used Community-Centered Measurement and the eight WealthWorks capitals to plan and then measure the increases in each type of capital. Focused on Built Capital, one of the team members converted a condemned fuel transfer station into a booming restaurant and feed store. In 2016, a reconstituted leadership team implemented a tourism strategy supported by CU. Today, the courthouse square houses a vibrant events space, coffee shop, and a secondhand retailer. In August 2021, two young women moved to DeWitt to launch Bridget Lane Boutique in the square. The new businesses are generating more than \$140,000 in additional sales taxes to support the city's annual budget. The nine new businesses employ more than 3 percent of the labor force and unemployment has dropped to 4.1 percent. The poverty rate dropped from 24 percent to 20.5 percent of the population.

Adding to the growing economy and momentum is a new hotel. When Communities Unlimited first met with the mayor of DeWitt in 2011, he said the town needed a hotel to capitalize on their historical and natural assets by attracting overnight tourists. At the time, a hotel feasibility study did not support a hotel investment. But as great community leaders worked together to develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem over the eleven years since, their work changed the community mindset to focus on the development of new businesses and local assets, including local tourist attractions. Local Chandler Boyd thus stepped up in 2020 to fulfill his entrepreneurial dreams through the development of Boyd Farmhouse Inn, with the support of community leaders. Proud proprietor Boyd is now scheduled to open and welcome the Inn's first visitors – and more community success on multiple fronts – in Spring 2022.



Investments in rural places have the potential to transform whole communities. This transformation takes a decade or longer, especially considering setbacks caused by decades of disinvestment, COVID-19, and an accelerating climate crisis. While funding a rural project for 12 months will create certain outputs, it cannot lead to the transformation that allows a community to thrive interdependently. Rural transformation requires capacity building, especially for people of color who have been historically excluded from opportunities to lead. Also needed is a new approach to long-term, Community-Centered Measures across quality of life, mindset shift, and economic activity with clear short- and medium-term markers of progress along the way.



# THE TRUE GAUGE: MORE POWER TO THE PEOPLE



**Mark Gabriel Little**

Mark Gabriel Little is a sustainable developer, writer, earth scientist, creative, and baba. He serves as executive director of CREATE-NC Growth center at UNC Chapel Hill, delivering technical assistance, actionable research, international convenings, and innovative policy to build wealth in economically distressed places. He is president-elect of the Geological Society of America and inaugural policy fellow with E Pluribus Unum Fund. Mark was an AAAS Congressional Science Fellow, worked in renewable energy development, and conducted earth science research in Tanzania and China. Mark also composes and performs music as MGL.

The opening waves of COVID-19 were stress tests on the United States. The disproportionate hospitalization, economic damage, and death to Indigenous, Black, and Latinx people proved that the patchwork of programs and policies designed to ameliorate our conditions was unsuccessful. Programs can be enlarged, and policies can be improved, but a shift in perspective is required. Many approaches are successful at mending damages, but most do not challenge the underlying power structure that has effectively guaranteed inequality. Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities, particularly in rural places, are alternately the objects of concern or disdain. But always objects, rarely protagonists. Rather than deciding what success means for these communities, we should listen to what Indigenous, Black, and Latinx people want.

## POWER: CAUSED THE PAST, CREATES THE FUTURE

In physics, power is a measure of the amount of work done over a period of time. In human society, power is the means by which an individual or a community can construct its future. Power enables communities to declare their own measures of success and construct their own solutions to the challenges they define. A community can draw its power from within, through the collective recognition of and respect for its own assets. And communities can build power based on what the broader society deems valuable.

In the United States, power is most recognized in terms of political and financial agency. Direct **measures of political power** include rates of voter registration and turnout, particularly in local elections; sophistication of collective political planning and coordination; percentage of candidates for and winners of elected office; and rates of participation on local boards. **Measures of financial power** include net wealth, income, property and business ownership, and access to cheap or affordable capital.

The global history of just struggles for more power is long, from gender-based salary equity to full political rights for Americans of Asian descent. However, the path towards power parity among some communities in rural America has languished for centuries. Financial and political power have been denied, eroded, and compromised by the folkways, mores, and laws of this nation for Indigenous peoples – both those in federally recognized tribes and not; for Latinx peoples – particularly those with deep roots in the North American continent, from before the Mexican concession of 1838 to the first-generation immigrants of today; and for Blacks, specifically the descendants of enslaved Africans.

There are many accounts of the historical, legal, and cultural evolution of power between America and its Latinx, Black, and Indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup> Today, some of the clearest examples of these complex power dynamics highlight the degradation of one group versus the benefit of another more powerful one. For example, the European Union relies on American woody biomass shipped across the Atlantic for combustion in electric power plants to meet its ambitious goals of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The result of this

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particular climate-economic exchange has been the environmental and social degradation of communities<sup>9</sup> in the rural Black Belt in and around the forests that have been clear cut, arguably with little to no climate benefit. Similar geographies of ethnically disparate impact can be found in the handling of waste and pollution, for example, higher rates of air pollution exposure<sup>10</sup> for all people of color across the U.S. and disproportionate hog-waste exposure<sup>11</sup> for Black, Indigenous and Latinx North Carolinians. These examples also reveal the passive ways in which financial and political power works: The powerful rarely engage in these place-based struggles because polluting industries, for example, do not even attempt to locate in the communities where the powerful live.

The historical legacies of power are even written in the street. Somewhere in the rural South exists a factory town built in the early 1900's by a major European metal refining corporation. In keeping with local laws at the time, the town was designed for racial segregation, with white and Black residential and downtown districts separated by a regional highway. The industrial operation continued for more than a century, providing decent wages but polluting local groundwater. Today the factory is closed, but the sides of town are distinguished by race and economic investment. Streets named for Confederate and Union Civil War and Revolutionary War generals dominate those on the Black side of town while the white side streets are largely named for anodyne tree species. Commercial investment and public buildings are exclusive to the white side of town, echoing a consistent feature of desegregation across the South: the closing of Black and Indian schools and destruction of Black business.

The struggle for power is a zero-sum game. The path to more financial and political power for some Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities could mean less power for states and the federal government, or less power for the “good ol’ boys” and “old money” in local communities. It will therefore face strong resistance. However, by directly challenging the ways in which the American political system is designed to exclude access, there are ways to increase political power – for example, by providing pay to “volunteers” on local boards, increasing pay and professionalizing local elected positions, and legalizing undocumented workers. This latter change would also quickly alter the daily dehumanization of day laborers as interchangeable “amigos,” which exists and persists only because these human beings have zero political power. Strategies might also seek to decrease the ability of those with wealth to purchase political power – for example, by adopting public financing of political campaigns and significant restrictions on political advertising. And there are strategies that directly address financial power by fairly compensating Indigenous, Black, and Latinx people and communities for the land, work, and wealth they and their ancestors have provided – for example, via a range of reparations.<sup>12</sup>




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## REALIZING POWER THROUGH UNDERSTANDING (AND BUILDING) ASSETS

In sum, there are two arguments for measuring increases in power as a critical component of rural development progress and equity.

- First, success is not simply repairing the damage caused by past power inequities. It is changing the power dynamics in favor of rural Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities so that damaging decision-making does not persist into the future. (*Ways to measure shifts in political and financial power were listed earlier.*)
- Second, these rural communities must recognize and elevate their unique political and non-political assets as bases for power. These assets may be intergenerational networks with urban relatives, knowledge of innovative climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, or highly valued cultural products that feature history, music, food, crafts, events, and tourism experiences. Many, particularly immigrant communities, have leaned on their assets to great success whether it be for pooling wealth, creative endeavors, and/or trans-continental knowledge transfer.

Funders and external groups *can* play a role in helping to value those assets more broadly. For example, extended family and church networks can contribute to an individual's creditworthiness when seeking a mortgage or commercial loan, as was done historically by Black-owned banks post-Reconstruction.<sup>13</sup> A philanthropy might fund a community/bank partnership to help the bank redesign its credit assessment process to value non-financial assets. The box below lists some potential measures of community power assets.

### Community Assets as Bases for Power: Some Metrics

- Size, location, and character of family network
- Size, location, and character of community network
- Value of immutable community property (e.g., tribal lands)
- Presence of shared institutions (e.g., tribal government, HBCUs, community churches)
- Level of Indigenous language and/or Spanish language fluency
- Cultural and/or Indigenous knowledge (e.g., ecosystem management, rice cultivation, song)
- Rate of intergenerational cultural practice transfer
- Rate of in-community care for older generations
- Rate of in-community care for children of parents not able to provide care
- Food production sovereignty or independence
- Other, non-accredited skills/knowledge (e.g., carpentry, masonry, husbandry)

To thrive, much of the work of rural Indigenous, Latinx, and Black communities will be in the recognition and elevation of their own assets as forms of power, as well as demanding and measuring the political and financial power they justly deserve as they build it.



## WE THE PEOPLE: A TRIED-AND-TRUE VISION FOR RURAL SUCCESS



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Anita Brown-Graham is the Gladys Hall Coates Distinguished Professor of Public Law and Government at the University of North Carolina. She founded and directs the ncIMPACT initiative, which seeks to expand the UNC School of Government's work with public officials on complex policy issues. She taught at the School from 1994 to 2006, specializing in governmental liability and economic development aimed at revitalizing communities. Anita served as director of the Institute for Emerging Issues (IEI) at NC State University from 2007-2016, working with business, government and higher education leaders to build North Carolina's capacity for economic development and prosperity. Anita is a William C. Friday Fellow, an American Marshall Fellow, and an Eisenhower Fellow. The White House named her a 2013 Champion of Change for her work at IEI. The Triangle Business Journal named her both a 2014 Woman in Business and the 2017 CEO of the year. She serves on several boards, including Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina.

Residents of rural communities tell us in survey after survey that what they want is what everyone else wants: a vibrant community that offers career opportunities, good schools for their children, access to medical care, and adequate and affordable infrastructure (housing stock, water and wastewater, broadband, and transportation). Many also say they want to live in a community in which they have a voice in the future and where the value of their civic contributions is appreciated. When asked to identify barriers to their dreams, rural residents often point to a lack of information and their inability to penetrate social networks important to accessing resources. These networks are often embedded in urban centers, and the ones that are closer to home may be off-limits to many members of the community.

Over the past three years, the ncIMPACT Initiative in North Carolina has profiled fifty development efforts in rural and urban communities that successfully connected people to the resources needed for families – and the communities in which they live – to thrive. After examining every type of development project we can think of, we found the core ingredients to success to be surprisingly constant. Successful development comes from the tried-and-true approach of seeking out voices of people across sectors and recognizing that development is a “contact sport,” best pursued through dense networks of contacts within the community and beyond.

The striking consistency of the approach across types of geography and time is compelling. After all, “development” is a deceptively simple term for a remarkably diverse collection of strategies to stimulate private-sector investment. Those working to upskill the workforce are not likely to see their work as having much in common with those redeveloping buildings for new uses – even though it often does. Moreover, development strategies often respond to significantly different situations. A rural community, for example, may find itself continuing to hemorrhage a historic job base of mining, farming, or low-wage manufacturing, while an urban community may be struggling with explosive population growth and new prosperity that fails to reach a broad spectrum of community residents that includes low-wealth people. While the different contexts may lead to different development needs or opportunities, the important ingredients across successful approaches seem to always require sufficient density and diversity of community networks.

Thus, the significance of networks – the connections communities have (or don't) within and beyond their borders – is a factor so important to development success that it must be measured. This is especially true of the impacts of cross-sector collaborations in mixed-race communities. Productive collaboratives tend to involve the public, for-profit, and not-for profit sectors along with philanthropy. And such efforts typically must endure over several years. Here are two examples of cross-sector collaboratives we have studied.



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### • Networks for Improving Educational Achievement

In 2014, student achievement in Wilson County Schools ranked in the bottom quartile of North Carolina public schools, and there were significant disparities based on race. The achievement rates for Black males were particularly troubling. Locals recognized that without a focus on equity, they would not make the progress they desired toward becoming a thriving community. To help reach the goal of having 100 percent of high school students prepared to succeed after graduation, the school system partnered with for-profit and nonprofit community organizations to launch *A Gentleman's Agreement*.

The program focuses on Black male high school students. It recruits ninth-grade students who may be struggling academically but show potential for peer leadership. The theory behind the program is that if these students become focused on academic achievement, they will influence others who are not in the program to become similarly focused. Of the first graduating cohort in the *Agreement*, all pursued some form of postsecondary education. Intermediate outcomes included increased attendance, decreased suspensions, and improved academic performance.

What caused that success? The program has only been possible because of the broad community support and collaboration it has enjoyed across sectors and races. Local companies conducted workshops and donated food for meetings. One company secured tickets for a trip to the premier regional performing arts center. Others helped with a visit to the National Museum of African American History in Washington, D.C. And, when the young men needed attire for an event, one local store gave each of them a shirt and tie. In terms of supporting the students after graduation, the local college and community college have committed to presenting a full scholarship to one graduating senior each year. It takes a village of all stripes. Essentially, *A Gentleman's Agreement* opened diverse, collaborating networks to its participants – and leveraged the density of the students' peer networks to amplify program results.

### • Networks for Equitable Development

Historically a mill town, the decline of the textile industry has resulted in economic and job loss for the City of Rocky Mount. The exodus of industries caused unemployment, mismatches between residents' skills and the remaining job opportunities, and subsequent population decline. Unsurprisingly, the city also had trouble attracting and retaining businesses and new residents.

Since 2015, the city and private investors have partnered on "adaptive reuse projects," using buildings in creative new ways to strengthen the local economy. This partnership has been one answer to the need to bring new residents and enterprises to the community, but did not originally include a strategy to support long-time residents. Concern grew quickly that Rocky Mount was headed for the gentrification realities many towns engaging in historic redevelopment face. Long-time residents and community activists made clear to the city that they would not stand for the displacement of lower-income or minority communities – most of the city's population – by an influx of more affluent, white populations.

To mitigate negative impacts of gentrification, Rocky Mount leaders have explored a variety of ideas. Two mitigation efforts now being implemented are land banking, a practice that involves purchasing land and selling it after it is approved for development, and community land trusts, in which a nonprofit corporation holds land on behalf of a place-based community and stewards the use of that land to produce better social and economic outcomes – for example, building and sustaining a robust stock of affordable workforce housing. Residents relied on their dense networks, which included elected and appointed leaders in the city, to bring more diverse participants, including outside investors, to the table. Together, they were able to identify and move initial solutions forward.



## TRANSITORY OR TREND?

Between these two (and every other successful rural story) ncIMPACT has studied, we have discovered four conditions associated with progress. Each is well-worth measuring along the way to rural development success:

- 1 Building a broad-based will for change with a laser focus on equity.** This is not just about getting people excited about the future. Within the network or collaborative everyone must understand the importance of an intentional focus on equity and have the skills to help the broader community build a will to ensure equitable outcomes from any change process.
- 2 Leading from a place of transparency and trust.** Networks must be fueled by people who are viewed as good listeners and honest brokers representing all important stakeholder groups. Some members will be the “keepers of the torch,” the people who insist on the alignment of resources and who keep things going even when the going gets tough. Without them, the effort will not thrive.
- 3 Staffing (whether paid or volunteer) that provide the facilitation, data analyses, and logistics capacity needed to keep things going.** Networked collaboratives work because there are people who see it as their responsibility to ensure the critical to-do’s get done.
- 4 Developing and delivering the benefits of dense and diverse networks.** These networks must be capable of being mobilized effectively to support the goals of the collaborative and the people it seeks to support. Diverse and dense networks at the community or organizational level are not enough. These networks must include community residents and the people the effort intends to benefit.

There may be a technical answer to how to repave a road. However, if the decision at hand is how to increase Black male academic achievement or to ensure minority communities benefit from adaptive reuse of buildings in their communities, then a community and its funders need to start thinking about the density and diversity of networks needed for success. Not every rural development project requires a deliberative networked approach, but the ones involving complex challenges will not find correspondingly complex solutions unless people are willing to work together and share resources aimed at producing equitable results.

In those cases, here are some questions worth asking – with answers worth measuring – about the health and wealth of networks that can help do the job:

- 1. What are the internal connections in the community?**
  - Are these connections based on high levels of trust?
  - Are the right people – the full range of stakeholders with self-interest or community interest on all sides of a challenge or opportunity – involved? (Who is missing?)
  - Are they fully engaged?
  - Are there formal or informal mechanisms or entities that maintain and build productive connections?
- 2. Do these connections allow for collective action within and beyond people of color in the community?**
  - How strong are the ties among leaders of color?
  - How strong are the ties between leaders of color and other community leaders?
- 3. What are the connections between the community and external resources outside the community?**
  - How many people in the community are connected to people and institutions beyond the community that possess high-value resources?
  - What is the effect of multiple connections to an external high-value outside resource?
  - Is there a sustainability plan for the development effort that includes connections to these external high-value resources?
  - How easily are those connections easily accessed and mobilized when needed?



## EDITOR'S COMMENTARY



**Brian Dabson**, *Field Perspectives Series Editor*

Brian Dabson, a pracademic with over 40 years in community and economic development policy and practice in the United Kingdom and the United States, consults, researches, and writes on rural and regional economic development, entrepreneurship, and regional collaboration and governance. His prior experience includes leading the Corporation for Enterprise Development (now Prosperity Now), the Rural Policy Research Institute, and Institute for Public Policy at the University of Missouri.

There are no easy solutions to the many challenges that rural America faces, but what is clear is that change and transformation must be driven by rural communities themselves. Local people must set the priorities and determine what constitutes success, and do so in ways that build networks inclusive of marginalized people. That is the main thrust of each of four perspectives.

Mark Little moves beyond calls for inclusivity. Success for him is about removing the shackles of the past and the institutional and cultural power structures that created and retain them. It is about rural Indigenous, Black, and Latinx communities recognizing and elevating their own assets to achieve political and financial power. Anita Brown-Graham has studied the efforts of communities that have found success in matching resources to their development needs, and concludes that development is a “contact sport” that must be pursued through dense social networks. She emphasizes the importance of collaboration and an intentional focus on equity to ensure that change brings equitable outcomes. For both, transformation does not just happen without effort, resources, trust, and will. This is the only way that communities can define and claim success in their own terms.

Both Shanna Ratner and Ines Polonius look to the wealth-creation framework (aka WealthWorks) to provide a structure for measuring success across multiple dimensions. It provides a transparent means for communities to assess how progress that improves assets in one area (say Built Capital, such as a new housing subdivision or a retail center) may undermine other important community assets, such as the loss of jobs, housing affordability, or loss of natural habitats. Shanna Ratner shows how wealth-creation value chains can shift how economic development success is defined by re-valuing rural in a regional context and can provide continuous measurement and learning tools for rural businesses, initiatives, and doers, as well as the organizations that support economic and business development. Ines Polonius emphasizes principles of Community-Centered Measurement to identify three outcomes associated with transformational change and success in rural communities: improved quality of life, positive shifts in mindsets, and enhanced local economic activity. Again, each makes the point that increasing equitable outcomes in and for rural requires the participation of local communities, residents, and stakeholders – intentionally including people living on the economic and social margins too often left out – in defining what progress markers look like in the short, medium, and longer term.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that all communities need access to financial and technical resources and that these resources are never provided without strings attached. Public agencies must be accountable to elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels for the funds they disburse – to ensure that the money is spent for approved purposes and that there is no fraud, waste, or abuse. To ensure that accountability criteria recognize the imperatives of community-defined outcomes, there must be a real give-and-take at the policy-making stage in Congress, state legislatures, and boardrooms to provide the necessary flexibility and scope for different definitions of success. The same situation and considerations apply to philanthropic and other private funds. But such negotiations can only take place in circumstances where marginalized communities have the power and resources and invitation to be at the table and ensure that their voices are heard, interests protected, and needs met. Frameworks and measures described in this brief are good places to start these negotiations.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For more information about the wealth creation framework, including multiple examples of its implementation in rural America, see S.E. Ratner, *Wealth Creation: A New Framework for Rural Economic and Community Development*, Taylor & Francis, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Processes such as You Get What You Measure<sup>®</sup> can help local participants identify key leverage points for change in a systems context as the basis for powerful measures.
- <sup>3</sup> As *the South Grows*, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and Grantmakers for Southern Progress, 2017.
- <sup>4</sup> Analogy first developed by Suzanne Anarde, CEO of the Rural Community Assistance Corporation, www.RCAC.org.
- <sup>5</sup> WealthWorks is a leading example of the wealth-creation economic development model described by Shanna Rather earlier in this brief. For more on WealthWorks, see <https://www.wealthworks.org>.
- <sup>6</sup> *Rural Development Hubs: Strengthening America's Rural Innovation Infrastructure*, Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group, 2019.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, <https://kawerak.org/climate-change-letter-to-senate-indian-affairs-committee/>.
- <sup>8</sup> For example, L.E. Gomez, *Inventing Latinos: A New Story of American Racism*, The New Press, 2020; P. Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*, Penguin Random House, 2018; M.M. Lowery, *The Lumbee Indians: An American Struggle*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2018; J.S. Olson, and R. Wilson, *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*, University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- <sup>9</sup> M. de Puy Kemp, "How marginalized communities in the South are paying the price for 'green energy' in Europe," CNN, 9 July 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2021/07/us/american-south-biomass-energy-invs/>.
- <sup>10</sup> J. Colmer, I. Hardman, J. Shimshack, and Voorheis, "Disparities in PM2.5 air pollution in the United States," *Science*, Vol. 369, 2020, Issue 6503, pp. 575-578, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaz9353>.
- <sup>11</sup> S. Wing, D. Cole, and G. Grant, "Environmental injustice in North Carolina's hog industry," *Environmental Health Perspectives*, Volume 108 (3), March 2000, pp 225-231, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1289/ehp.00108225>.
- <sup>12</sup> W.A. Darity and A.K. Mullen, *From Here to Eternity: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- <sup>13</sup> S. Garrett-Scott, *Banking on Freedom: Black Women in U.S. Finance Before the New Deal*, Columbia University Press, 2019.

## ABOUT THE FIELD PERSPECTIVES SERIES

The series aims to catalyze more effective and fair rural policy and practice.

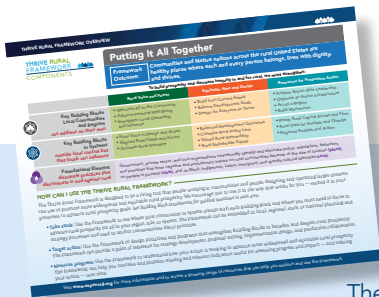
In this series, we ask thinkers and doers with rural experience and expertise to propel and deepen understanding about rural issues and realities, shine a light on rural innovation and investment opportunities, connect and align fields of practice and interest, and call for constructive changes in the design and implementation of key public and private systems – all toward achieving 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.**

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Based on research and best practices from the field, Aspen CSG's **Thrive Rural Framework** shows what needs to be true within both a local-level and systems-level theory of change for equitable rural prosperity to occur.

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

This brief has many themes and recommendations that connect to elements in the Thrive Rural Framework. The authors noted the importance of history and how power was and continues to be used in discriminatory ways. This connects to the framework's **Foundational Element** that calls for dismantling discriminatory practices based on race, place, and class.

Exploring **Systems-Level theory of change**: Authors noted the "Rural Voice and Power" Building Block is a vital requirement for communities or projects to measure meaningful change. And the importance of accurate rural data in measurement connects to the "Rural Data for Analysis and Chance" Building Block.

Exploring **Local-Level theory of change**: You may recognize the "Building from Current Assets" Building Block when the authors talk about understanding and building a wide range of assets in the community. The authors also connect to "Balanced Development Outcomes" and "Design for Everyone to Thrive" when they highlight the need to choose measures that address all aspects of community well-being and when the success of all members of the community is considered.

**Use the Thrive Rural Framework** in your work to take stock, target action, and gauge progress on equitable rural prosperity!

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

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