

WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY



Building Funder Capacity to Work with Communities: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

VISION: COMMUNITIES WORKING WITH FUNDERS ON THEIR OWN TERMS

When people and organizations in underinvested rural communities and Native nations seek funding for their work, they are often required to learn and use specific language, processes, practices, and measures of success to conform to funder expectations and systems. This process can be difficult, intimidating, and frustrating — and it requires community members to adopt strategies toward success metrics that [don't always match](#) what the communities prioritize. Recognizing this, some funders are shifting gears to learn communities' language, processes, and practices, enabling more equitable partnerships and impactful projects that meet community needs.

VOICES: BUILDING FUNDER CAPACITY

Respectful engagement with rural communities and Native nations on their own terms is essential to environmental justice. Fair treatment and meaningful involvement (see definition of environmental justice, above) require agencies and funders to build their own capacity to engage communities effectively. Some funders are working to build their capacities by learning from communities, shifting power to communities (trust-based philanthropy), and changing the way they operate to better meet community needs. Philanthropic funders, especially, are well-positioned to experiment with new models that can then be adopted and adapted by larger institutions like federal agencies.

Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation in rural southeastern California is a leader in this movement, modeling and demonstrating ways to collaboratively build capacity across agencies, funders, organizations, and communities. And the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) National

RURAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [defines environmental justice](#) as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

Environmental justice is central to the ultimate outcome of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#): *Communities and Native nations across the rural United States are healthy places where each and every person belongs, lives with dignity, and thrives.* The history behind these issues, as well as the longitudinal health issues they cause — from inequitable access to safe drinking water to inequitable protection from climate risks like flooding — sit at the intersection of health and rural development, providing meaningful opportunities to advance equitable rural prosperity across rural communities and Native nations.



Building Funder Capacity to Work with Communities: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) is an example of a federal agency structure that can be leveraged to implement successful models.

IMPERIAL COUNTY

Imperial County is a rural agricultural area encompassing the southeastern corner of California, bordering Arizona and Mexico. Nearly the size of Connecticut, it is the least populous county in California, with approximately 179,000 residents (US [Census](#)), 86% of whom identify as Hispanic or Latino. Environmental justice is a strong concern in Imperial County, which faces some of the [worst air pollution in the country](#), and the county is home to a number of [colonias](#) — areas of settlement near the US-Mexico border that grew informally without incorporation or infrastructure.

Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation

[Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation](#) (IVWF) is a health and wellness-focused regional funder serving Imperial County, California. Notably, IVWF also acts as a [Rural Development Hub](#), facilitating connections and mobilizing resources for the region. IVWF has worked hard to build its capacity to engage the community on its own terms: Executive Director Roque Barros, who grew up in the area and knows it well, prefers to spend his time out in the community, eschewing a formal office in favor of meeting in public spaces that are more comfortable for all involved.

A key part of IVWF's work as a Rural Development Hub is hosting Learning Exchanges, which bring together people and organizations to learn, share, and discover ways to work together to make the Imperial Valley "a better place to live for all." IVWF's Learning Exchanges are carefully constructed to bring together participants across three groups: disconnected (community groups without formal structures or resources), connected (organizations with formal recognition and funding), and decision-makers (funders and government).

Over time, working together builds the capacity of all three groups — they build a shared understanding of community needs, priorities, and challenges and develop strong working relationships and trust. While these Learning Exchanges do the work of traditional community capacity building and connecting — disconnected participants get to know decision-makers and learn how to navigate funding and power structures — they also facilitate capacity building for funders and decision-makers, who learn to work with the disconnected groups as equals, building a deeper understanding of their priorities and contexts. This mutual capacity-building model has enabled Imperial Valley communities to develop and fund various projects that advance equitable rural prosperity and are driven by the community, not by the funder.



Roque Barros, Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation:

"For me, it's always been about developing trust through a community-building approach. What I've done is really looked at power building with the underinvested communities."

CAPACITY BUILDING

When we speak of "capacity building," what do we mean? Whose capacity are we building or adding to? As the Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (Aspen CSG) has previously [written](#), "Communities that have the ways and means to undertake challenges demonstrate 'capacity.'" But when rural development funders and practitioners use the term "capacity building," they often refer more narrowly to practices that build the skills of communities and organizations to work with funders — things like learning how to apply for and manage funds from philanthropy or government.

The [United Nations](#) defines capacity building as "the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world." This definition is notable because it focuses exclusively on organizations and communities — funders and agencies are assumed to already have "capacity." Aspen CSG takes a [wider view of capacity building](#), including funders, agencies, and communities.



Building Funder Capacity to Work with Communities: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

US EPA National Environmental Justice Advisory Council

Members of EPA's [National Environmental Justice Advisory Council](#) (NEJAC) advise the agency on "broad, cross-cutting issues related to environmental justice." Part of this work involves giving feedback on how the agency can build its capacity to work equitably with and for environmental justice communities. For example, in August 2023, NEJAC provided detailed recommendations to the EPA administrator addressing the need for training to ensure reviewers of Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) are responsive to community needs. As the letter accompanying the recommendations states, "Without a comprehensive understanding of and accountability to environmental justice, decision-makers may perpetuate or exacerbate existing disparities faced by communities overburdened by environmental harms and marginalized in government processes. . . . Training could support a shift in process, approach, and review to one that centers and serves communities first as the primary client of the Agency."

While federal agencies are constrained by regulation and often slow to change practices, they can and are making important shifts when presented with clear recommendations such as those from the NEJAC. Jacqueline Shirley, a NEJAC member and Yupik Tribal member of the Native Village of Hooper Bay, expressed hope that EPA can shift to be more responsive to communities. She pointed out that EPA is experimenting with new processes for grant selection that may allow applicants to tell their stories in person or via videoconference, which could work better for some applicants than traditional written proposals. In addition, the new [Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers](#), known as TCTACs, will provide a channel for agency feedback in addition to traditional community-focused capacity building.



Sherri White-Williamson, EJCAN:

"The communities here are not going to be able to take advantage of all this federal money. Much of it will go to 501(c)(3)s, and these community groups are often not 501(c)(3)s — they're hesitant to do the paperwork to even become a 501(c)(3). We need things that are more basic than what the policymakers assume."

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES: POWER IMBALANCES, MISCONCEPTIONS, LACK OF TRUST

Environmental justice communities face a legacy of systemic discrimination based on place, race, and class (see the Thrive Rural Framework's [Foundational Element](#)) that exacerbates traditional unequal power dynamics between funders and communities. This dramatic power imbalance makes it challenging for communities to work with funders on their own terms.

Funders often see rural communities and Native nations through a deficit framework, highlighting areas seen as lacking and failing to recognize community knowledge, strengths, and capacities. These misconceptions about community capacity and deeply ingrained biases can lead to paternalism, dismissiveness, and lack of trust. In such situations, funders may dictate community project types and structures, micromanage funds and implementation, or simply decline to fund a community's highest-priority projects, believing they know what is needed better than community members do. Each of these actions leads to disengaged community members and ineffective projects.

BUILDING FUNDER CAPACITY FROM THE OUTSIDE

While staff and advisory groups associated directly with funders work to build their capacity to engage effectively with communities, community groups are also taking the initiative to build funders' capacity to work with them. For example, Environmental Justice Community Action Network (EJCAN), a grassroots group based in eastern North Carolina, hosts "toxic tours" that bring funder staff members into communities to see their contexts and challenges in person and speak to residents about their priorities. According to founder Sherri White-Williamson, these tours tend to strongly impact participants, who report that the experience causes them to rethink their approaches to funding environmental justice.



Building Funder Capacity to Work with Communities: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study



Jacqueline Shirley, RCAC, member EPA NEJAC:

"Federal agencies, they always say the communities need to trust them, but agencies need to trust the communities. That's where the trust is broken."

Even when funders use an asset framework, focusing on communities' strengths and listening to their priorities, the basic systems and procedures of the funding process can be inherently inequitable. For example, many funders require applicants to complete long and complex proposals through difficult-to-manage online portals, even for small amounts of funding. These systems often require the applicant to prepare and upload multiple documents in specific formats, which can take many hours, days, or even weeks to prepare. In most cases, the specialized knowledge required to prepare a proposal doesn't affect the applicant's ability to carry out an effective project.

WHAT IT WILL TAKE: LISTENING, FLEXIBILITY, LONG-TERM TRUST



Roque Barros, Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation:

"We as funders have to change, and we have to make a commitment to learn first."

Committed, sustained learning and listening on the part of funders is the first step to establishing equitable partnerships with rural communities and Native nations. To build their capacity to work with communities, funders need to learn where communities are coming from: how they see their challenges, how they prefer to work, and what their priorities are. This type of learning requires time, commitment, and engaging in a way that is comfortable for community members — it cannot be accomplished with a quick "public engagement" session in a space controlled by funder staff. Mutual learning and capacity building, as demonstrated by IVWF's Learning Exchanges, provide a stellar example of a way forward.

One practical step funders can take to build their capacity is to hire staff who come from and deeply understand the communities they serve. And once those staff members are hired, make sure they have what they need to stay connected to those communities and facilitate learning for the organization or agency.



Sherri White-Williamson, EJCAN:

"Federal agencies need to start hiring more staff from rural communities — more grassroots kind of folks. And federal staff members definitely need to get out from behind desks if they're doing work that impacts rural communities"

A need for funder flexibility came up in every conversation related to this case study. Once funders learn about community needs and priorities, they need systems that allow them to meet those needs flexibly and respectfully. This may mean changing long-established systems like applications and reporting to be more streamlined and accessible. It may mean shifting the types of projects funded based on community feedback. Or it may mean making long-term, multi-year investments beyond project support. It may even mean taking on the role of a [Rural Development Hub](#), as IVWF has done in Imperial County.

NATIVE NATIONS ARE NOT JUST RURAL COMMUNITIES

While both rural communities and Native nations will benefit from listening, flexibility, and long-term trust on the part of funders, it is important to recognize that Native nations have separate and specific needs different from other rural communities. As Aspen CSG wrote in [Measure Up: A Call to Action](#), Native nations are mostly rural in setting, but culture, governance, and historical and ongoing oppression make their realities different from the rest of rural America. From a history of forced assimilation to disparities in legal and physical infrastructure, these differences make it essential for funders to undertake efforts aimed at building their capacity to work with Native nations specifically.



Building Funder Capacity to Work with Communities: A Rural Environmental Justice Case Study

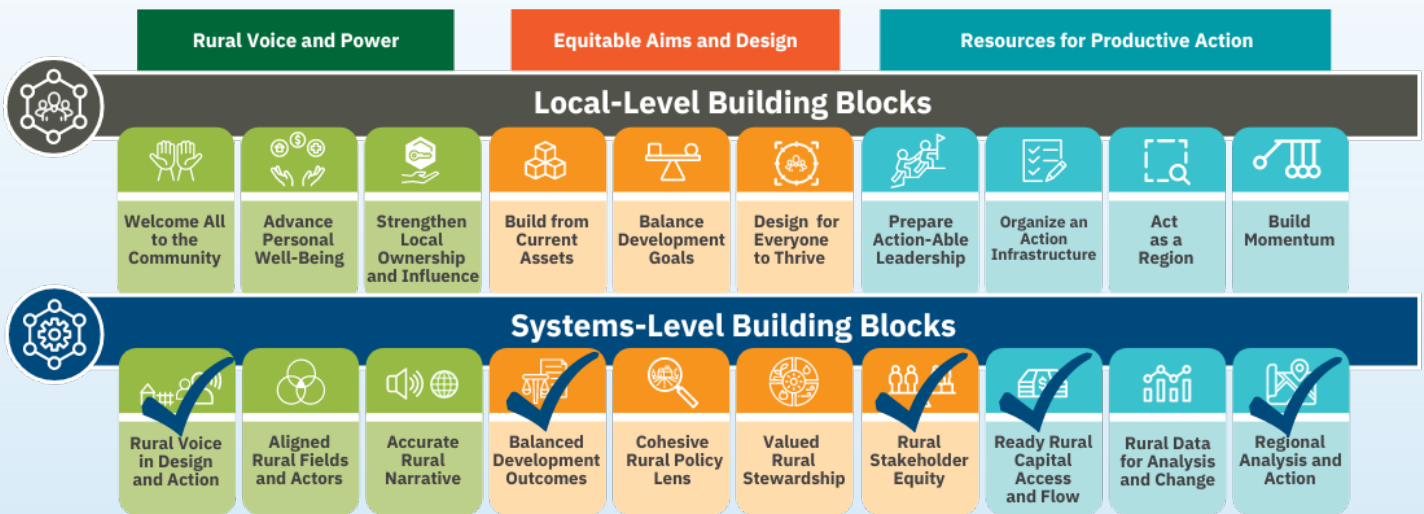


Roque Barros, Imperial Valley Wellness Foundation:

"You have to be open to taking a comprehensive and holistic approach — all of these things are tied together."

In the long term, the best way for funders to build capacity to work with rural communities and Native nations is to build trust with those communities and nations. This long process begins with learning and listening, grows with demonstration and change, and solidifies with mutual partnership and engaged work.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



Foundational Element: Building funder capacity to work with communities requires local grantees to have mutual decision-making power and the tools to dismantle discriminatory practices based on place, race, and class.

Community Strategies Group



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

Aspen 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.

Aspen CSG's consultant Rebecca Huenink led the writing process for this case study. We are grateful for her contributions.

This work was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.