

MEASURE UP: A CALL TO ACTION

Principles for Measuring Rural and Native Nation Development Progress



Today, we have a generational opportunity to strengthen prosperity and equity in communities and Native nations across the rural United States.

Funders and investors are providing more money and attention to the needs of rural communities than ever before. However, this increased investment won't have the desired impact without a fundamental reassessment of how we measure rural development and a redesign of the funding pipeline itself.

This is an Executive Summary of [Measure Up: A Call to Action](#). This brief seeks to open and deepen conversations about better ways for funders and investors to design programs that consider lower-capacity communities' realities, needs, and goals.

THE PROCESS

The Aspen Institute Community Strategies Group (CSG) convened [46 rural economic and community development practitioners](#) from a diverse range of rural and Native nation communities to inform [Measure Up: A Call to Action](#). Each participant was recommended by organizations with deep engagement in rural America, including the Rural Community Assistance Partnership, the Housing Assistance Council, and Rural LISC. Aspen CSG offered an honorarium for participants' preparation and participation.

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



Putting It All Together

Framework Outcome:

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

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

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



6 PRINCIPLES FOR MEASURING RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

1

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 1:

Expand the range of individual and community assets used to indicate critical rural development progress.



Build from Current Assets

Conventional measures of development progress are often inappropriate in rural communities, especially in places that have been historically discriminated against or need prerequisite skill-building. Instead, metrics that highlight critical “asset changes” focus on a place’s specific economic sectors and geographies, identify obstacles, and gauge whether supports and systems are in place to catalyze and sustain longer-term progress.

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Become familiar with and accept frameworks that value community and development progress as evidenced by changes in diverse forms of capital and assets – and their preconditions.</p> <p>Measure assets and opportunities as well as needs.</p> <p>Push boundaries and creativity to expand the menu of measures for what can qualify as progress or effectiveness.</p> <p>Design solutions to address the inherent limitations of federal data for communities and Native nations across the rural United States.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Engage in an ongoing dialogue with government funders about expanding and improving progress metrics for rural community and economic success.</p> <p>Formalize a field of practice around innovative frameworks to measure and mark true wealth and asset building.</p> <p>Support local nonprofits and governments to document qualitative methods that better illuminate ground-level success.</p> <p>Support training for local and regional development organizations.</p>	<p>Familiarize yourself with community and economic development frameworks for measuring multiple assets and aspects of rural development progress, such as changes in school enrollments or labor market participation rates.</p> <p>Firmly but diplomatically push back on external funder metrics of progress and success if they don’t meet your community reality.</p> <p>Have confidence that you know your community.</p> <p>Engage often and regularly with state and federal elected and appointed leaders.</p>

2

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 2:

Do not dictate what to measure. Work with rural initiatives to define the progress indicators that make local – and mutual – sense.



Rural Voice in Design and Action

It’s important that the rural initiatives define their own unique success markers over the funding period. These tangible outcomes must fulfill a community’s vision and understanding of necessary steps toward success – while also moving toward a funder’s desired longer-term impact. The rural effort and funder must together answer the following question: *What really matters to measure, now, at this moment of action?*

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Work with grantees/awardees to understand their varying contexts at the front end.</p> <p>Together, select and customize useful and realistic metrics of community progress that make local sense.</p> <p>Ask for, accept, and learn from any (optional) supplemental community-driven metrics.</p> <p>Conduct constructive mid-course consultations.</p> <p>Discard data reporting requirements that are not useful for project implementation, impact, and learning.</p> <p>Emphasize grant selection and monitoring criteria over data collected to control fraud and misuse.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Support efforts by rural initiatives, governments, and nonprofits to encourage public funders to adopt innovative, community-driven program metrics.</p> <p>Support intermediaries to develop practical, community-driven measurement approaches and protocols.</p>	<p>Advocate for and urge government and philanthropy to engage rural communities and practitioners in defining measurements toward rural prosperity – and accepting them.</p> <p>Report it anyway.</p> <p>Press philanthropy and field intermediaries to give you the support you need to measure better.</p> <p>Make some measurement noise on funder feedback and evaluation surveys.</p> <p>Start the negotiation; set up a conversation with the funder during the application process or at the front end of a grant to negotiate and establish indicators, measures, and reporting requirements that are useful, realistic, and doable for you.</p>



6 PRINCIPLES FOR MEASURING RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

3

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 3:

Measure progress relative to the rural effort’s starting point at its current stage of development – not against an ideal “success” standard.



Design for Everyone to Thrive

The drive for “large numbers as impact” ignores real impact. Each rural community project has a unique starting point that depends on organizational capacity and the status of conditions in the rural community. No matter the asset being measured, understanding and documenting the baseline from which results are measured is essential to defining impact.

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Measure progress from community starting points, not predetermined ideals of success.</p> <p>Be clear on the difference between measuring progress and measuring success.</p> <p>Take into account the time variable in setting progress expectations.</p> <p>Gauge rural progress as ratios in relation to the starting point to determine true impact.</p> <p>Check for – and work to eliminate – program-design bias against initiatives starting at different stages of development.</p> <p>Convene and collaborate – across government, private philanthropy, and rural development practitioners.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Support and test innovative methods to assess starting-point baselines as well as conditions that signify progress at different stages of development.</p>	<p>Know your own starting line. Be a champion for your own starting line – and what progress looks like from that starting line.</p> <p>Report your impact as progress from your starting point.</p> <p>Carry out regular reassessments to gauge progress and to assure that clients and communities are speaking clearly about local conditions, assets, and priorities.</p>

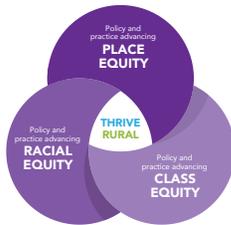
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MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 4:

Measure decreases in place, race, and class divides – and increases in the participation and decision-making that reduce these divides – as inherent elements of increasing rural prosperity.



Design for Everyone to Thrive



Policy and investment designers should compare the profiles of initiatives they support versus the ones they miss and reach out to the “unreached rural” in every region, race, and class. Using absolute and relative measurement, initiatives should consistently measure decreases in inequity – across race, place, and class. Additionally, all stakeholders should diversify and measure the composition of their decision-making groups.

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Measure yourself first. Assess the distribution of grants and investments to see the economic, place, and race demographics of where your funding or lending is going – and is not going.</p> <p>Ask grantees and awardees to measure changes in inequity.</p> <p>Check for equity bias in application procedures and funding requirements and expectations. Additionally, ask for equity process indicators and outcome measures.</p> <p>For disaster-related funding, seek ways to measure that the most vulnerable rural populations and rural areas with the least capacity have prevention and preparedness procedures in place in advance.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Support the creation and maintenance of national, regional, or local civic leadership diversity databases.</p> <p>Support methods and pilots for analyzing and measuring equity in rural places.</p>	<p>Know your local equity baseline, especially in regards to class, race, place, gender, and age.</p> <p>Evaluate equity conditions within your own organizations.</p> <p>Ask the “reducing/increasing equity” question whenever you design a project or initiative to implement it in a way that increases fair opportunity and equity.</p> <p>Work toward diversity in local decision-making positions.</p>



6 PRINCIPLES FOR MEASURING RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

5

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 5:

Identify, value, and measure effective collaboration as progress toward rural prosperity.



Aligned Rural Fields and Actors



Organize an Action Infrastructure

Collaboration across organization and place is vital for rural prosperity and requires a sturdy organizational framework for acting together. However, effective rural collaboration typically takes more time and effort than going it alone, and funders rarely support it. Collaboration must be built on trust, shared understanding and goals, broad participation and decision-making across stakeholders, established methods and structures for working together, and leveraging resources.

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Ask grantees and awardees, when relevant, to report what they consider to be indicators and measures of useful and strengthened collaboration.</p> <p>Inventory the regional collaborations of rural grantees and awardees – and their comparative outcomes.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Support the documentation and analysis of rural-focused collaborative efforts.</p> <p>Support the identification of indicators and collection and use of data related to rural and Native nation collaborations.</p>	<p>Identify the elements that make your close-at-hand collaborations work (or not) – along with the resulting impact.</p> <p>Understand your network connections and their potential for collaboration.</p> <p>Assess the impact of your individual organization efforts, as compared to local, regional and over-the-horizon collaborations.</p> <p>Include indicators of collaboration and its impact in reports to funders, whether required or not. This will help public, philanthropic funders, and private sector investors understand the importance of collaboration.</p>

6

MEASUREMENT PRINCIPLE 6:

Identify, value, and measure signals of local momentum as progress toward rural prosperity.



Build Momentum

Momentum is evidence of rural progress and success. Increasing youth and young adult engagement are particularly good indicators of momentum because they increase children’s and young adults’ belief – and local hope – that they can find a way to stay or move back to the community. Also important is a community’s sense of pride in itself, or a willingness among locals to invest in a community, often without expectation of external support or reward.

Government	Philanthropy	Rural Practitioners
<p>Ask for measures of the vital signs of momentum.</p> <p>Consider momentum when making decisions and reporting impact, but don’t turn momentum into a prerequisite or requirement.</p>	<p>Government recommendations plus:</p> <p>Understand, invest in, and measure the organizational and collaborative design and capacity that is key to building community momentum.</p> <p>Commission surveys and analysis of rural and Native youth priorities and hopes; they are key indicators of community futures.</p> <p>Cultivate – and measure – community momentum.</p>	<p>See the indicators of the 20 Clues to Rural Community Survival and the Measuring Community Capacity Building workbook for ideas of what momentum might look like in your community. For example, would creating a “community momentum dashboard” be helpful in your place to change mindsets and spark more hope?</p> <p>Regularly survey or consult with your community youth and young adults, who often have a clear-eyed assessment of their hometowns and what could make it better.</p> <p>Document and report the micro-victories that signal momentum.</p> <p>Proclaim your small-but-real momentum victories to your own community and region.</p>



ANNOTATED LIST OF RESOURCES

[Click here](#) for an annotated list of resources that can help you dig deeper into what kinds and levels of rural data are and are not available, different approaches to categorizing rural places, sources for specific types of rural indicators, resources on Native community measurement and development, and information on frameworks that are being used to reorient the field toward measuring assets rather than deficits.

PRACTITIONER VOICES



There has to be mutual respect, and I think oftentimes communities value what funders bring to the table because of the connection to the financial resources that will come along with them. But that same respect isn't always given or shown by funders who walk into a space acknowledging the [local] work. . . If you don't demand that, it doesn't happen."



Felecia Lucky



How you perceive is how you proceed. I believe this and I witness misperceptions about Native America all the time. These misperceptions limit our opportunities and we use a lot of resources to break down these misperceptions just to get to a starting point with funders."



Lakota Vogel



To us, rural is a culture, and when we define it as a culture and make it a topic around equity, I think it's harder to marginalize rural people in rural places. [A] huge part is just ensuring that people understand who we are and that we have representation in those different buckets – to not only see our successes and see our wins, but to understand how to digest our data and make it a story that's positive and not weaponize it against us."



Justin Burch

Community Strategies Group



aspen institute

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 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.

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