

WHAT'S WORKING IN RURAL CASE STUDY 3



Building Power Together: Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Network

THE ISSUE: LEADERSHIP TO BUILD POWER

What does it take for communities who have been historically and systematically excluded to develop authentic and effective leadership that builds power to challenge the status quo? Too often, “leadership development” in marginalized communities has amounted to outsiders telling community members what they’re lacking and how they should change—or deeming certain people acceptable for leadership, just as long as they do not threaten existing power dynamics. These deficit frameworks replicate power imbalances and can be as damaging as they are ineffective.

In a rural context, these issues are often magnified as layers of discrimination based on place, race, and class interact (see the Foundational Element of the [Thrive Rural Framework](#)). Rural communities have deep wells of talent, creativity, and leadership, but much of that talent can be sidelined by exclusionary systems. While the term “empowerment” has been diluted almost beyond recognition in recent years, some marginalized rural communities are doing authentic empowerment work on their own terms and, through it, growing rural leaders and building power in their rural places.

THE SPOTLIGHT: SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN LAND RETENTION NETWORK

The [Sustainable Forestry and African-American Land Retention Network](#) (SFLR) is a Black-led organization founded in 2012 to keep Black-owned forests forested and within the family. The Network’s mission is to create a sustainable system of support for African American forest owners that significantly increases the value of African American-owned forests, land retention, and asset development for Black families in the US South. SFLR is a network of eight anchor organizations that are deeply grounded in rural Black communities across the South, from Virginia to Texas. These organizations use sustainable forestry as a way for landowners to maintain their deep ties to the land while promoting wealth creation and land retention.

Leadership development is embedded in the work of SFLR’s [anchor organizations](#). As anchor organizations serve and support landowners exploring ways to preserve and manage their forested property, they also work together as a network to uplift issues that need to be addressed at the local, state, or even national levels. Staff from an anchor organization accompany community members on their journeys to address these issues, developing leadership capacity in rural communities by building trusting relationships and, ultimately, building power within communities and families that have been largely excluded from existing systems.



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THE PRACTICE: LEADING THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

SFLR's leadership development work is grounded, at every level, in authentic, trusting relationships—from the relationships among the network and the anchor organizations to the relationships between organization staff and community members to the relationships among landowners, their communities, and their forests. These trusting relationships form the basis of a vibrant system in which strong, equitable leadership grows—just as tree roots and soil support the growth of strong trees.

Ground in place: staff from the community

SFLR's anchor organizations are managed and staffed by people who belong to the communities they serve. This grounding in place allows the organizations and their staff to understand community concerns and dynamics, make a personal connection with landowners, and meet families where they are in the process of preserving and managing their forests. Staffing from the community allows the organizations to build relationships that enable them to have honest and forthright conversations with the people they serve, with the understanding that the organization has the landowner and their family's interests at heart. Community-grounded staff also understand what's at stake and bring a passion and commitment that drives the work and facilitates long-term leadership development, as the energy of their commitment spreads to the landowners and their families, who in turn become leaders in their communities and the larger movement.



Ebonie Alexander, Executive Director, Black Family Land Trust, Inc., SFLR Virginia Anchor Organization:

"Our work is spiritual, it connects our land stewardship with the African American land ethic; it brings passion and integrity to our work."

Don't tell or show: walk together

At the heart of SFLR's leadership development is the practice of **committed stewardship**: anchor organization staff members don't just tell or show landowners and their families how to preserve their land and practice sustainable forestry—they stay with them every step of the way as they learn, put their learning into practice, and become leaders who support others on a similar path. Walking together means accompanying each person on their specific journey, from sitting together to fill out forms, to visiting a public official in their office, to meeting with a forester, to presenting at a conference about the work. The practice of walking together is grounded in trusting relationships; those landowners and families engaged in the process know they can trust the anchor organization's staff to be there for them, which allows them to take risks, learn new things, and grow into the leaders their communities need them to be.



Alton Perry, Director, Sustainable Forestry and Land Retention Project, Roanoke Electric Cooperative, SFLR North Carolina Anchor Organization:

"Working with a landowner, you've got to walk with them through the process. You can't bring them through a process and leave them. That's what has happened so many times in the past. You have to fill in the gaps so the landowner feels more empowered and learns to use the asset."

HEIRS' PROPERTY AND BLACK LAND LOSS

Heirs' property is land that has been passed down through generations without a will, creating shared ownership among many descendants. Over time, unless title to the land is cleared and land rights secured, the opportunity for those owners to use their land for economic benefit is limited. As a result, underserved, vulnerable landowners throughout the country—especially women, indigenous people, Black Americans, and low-income people—have involuntarily lost their family property through contested claims, unaffordable high transaction costs, forced sales to speculators, and outright fraud. Black families alone, researchers estimate, have lost hundreds of billions of dollars in such land value over the last century. And the US Department of Agriculture considers heirs' property the "leading cause of Black involuntary land loss."



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Don't just provide a service: stay engaged for the long haul

Building on the practice of walking together, SFLR anchor organizations stay engaged with the people they serve beyond the provision of a specific service or fulfillment of an immediate need. Regular outreach and check-ins allow staff to cultivate relationships, understand evolving needs, and support emerging leaders in the community. Program participants grow into leaders within their communities and the sustainable forestry field as they build their knowledge, learn how existing systems work, and see what needs to happen to change and evolve those systems. Landowner networking and advocacy groups provide opportunities for participants to build their leadership skills. These new leaders understand the challenges on the ground and can mobilize their communities to build authentic power at the local, state, and national levels.



John Littles, Executive Director, McIntosh Sustainable Environment and Economic Development (McIntosh SEED), SFLR Georgia Anchor Organization:

"We educate folks on their rights and how policy works. Then it's about empowering them to use those rights—whether they want to meet with an official, visit an office, or just to be educated on the issues. And you have to keep them empowered, keep a sense that this consistency is what it's going to take. And if officials are not doing their jobs, then you need to come out and vote. Not sit home complaining, get registered to vote, and build a power base—you've got to have a power base, and that means trusted leadership."

TRY THIS AT HOME: TIPS FOR PUTTING THE PRACTICE TO WORK

SFLR offers the following tips to other organizations seeking to undertake this work:

1 HIRE COMMUNITY-GROUNDED STAFF FROM A VARIETY OF BACKGROUNDS

With strong technical assistance values and organizational culture in place, you can get people from the community the right skills to do the work. The key is to lead by example and provide all the training staff need to do the job. You can give people information, but you can't give them the community connections that are so important to the work.

2 BE RELIABLE IN BUILDING AND MAINTAINING TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Say what you mean and mean what you say, and always respond to people in a timely manner and treat them with respect.

3 KNOW THAT IT TAKES COMMITMENT

Walking with people isn't a 9-5, open-and-shut, check-the-box process. People need support in their own ways, at their own times, and with their own issues—you have to keep coming back and offering the support that people need, in the way they need it.

4 DEVELOPING THE LEADERSHIP NECESSARY TO BUILD POWER TAKES TIME

As people get more confident in their knowledge and practice, they understand what needs to be done for their communities. At this point, they are becoming leaders. But if you stop reaching out to them before that point, you lose the opportunity to build durable power.





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LEADERSHIP IN THE THRIVE RURAL FRAMEWORK



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 our *What's Working in Rural* series. We are grateful for her contributions.

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