

# Principles for Rural Philanthropic Engagement

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*Developed by the United Philanthropy Forum's Working Group on Rural Equity*

## Introduction

Effective rural philanthropy challenges preconceptions about rural communities; acknowledges the historic and continuing marginalization, exclusions and/or disenfranchisement of rural people of color; recognizes the value of place to its residents; focuses on building from within; emphasizes impact over scale; and prioritizes equity, trust-building and co-creation with local partners.

Though many of these principles are equally relevant to non-rural philanthropic practice, each one arises from the Working Group's collective experience of how funders have traditionally operated in rural places and the imperative to change many of these practices if foundations are to have a positive and significant impact on equitable rural prosperity in our nation.

Also underlying these Principles is our belief that philanthropy needs to explicitly address the systemic racism that continues to undergird the experiences that Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, and other People of Color in this country and that although many rural places are disadvantaged by their geography, rural people of color are doubly and triply disadvantaged by race and often class.

## 1. ELEVATE LOCAL VOICES

Listen, learn, and unlearn from authentic rural leaders, particularly from Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color, as well as other under- or unrepresented groups, and from those with local lived rural experience. They are trusted and can articulate how identity, history, and politics combine to suppress the power and prosperity of their communities. Don't assume they are well connected to existing political, economic, and philanthropic power structures. They can help funders appreciate a community's history, understand how change happens and how communications flow.

## 2. BUILD A TRULY INCLUSIVE TABLE

Search out unfamiliar partners. Reconsider the presence of traditional partners and consider investing in non-traditional organizations and informal structures. Don't look for your typical grantee/partner with formal education, nonprofit management capacity and an established 501© (3) structure.

## 3. FOSTER TRUST-BASED AND RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS

Focus on building trust, knowing that it can take years of work. Many rural communities are distrustful of outsiders and wary of local leaders who profess to represent the entirety of the community. Seek out leaders that embody the multiple perspectives that exist. Acknowledge that power and privilege undermine trust within the community. Embrace the practices and belief of Allyship.

## 4. RECOGNIZE RELATIONSHIPS THAT ALREADY EXIST

Search out existing networks before attempting anything new -- networks of collaboration, resource sharing, and co-strategizing. Don't create funder driven collaboratives that ignore what already exists.

## 5. GROW LOCALLY CONTROLLED ASSETS

Invest to build locally anchored, sustainable assets. Account for the centuries of wealth extraction and the concentration of assets in metropolitan areas. Resource communities in ways that builds local capacity and power and enables them to develop solutions that actualize their aspirations. Work within a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity of resources and build on local pride of what was and a vision of what can be.

## 6. RESPECT NATIVE SOVEREIGNTY WHEN WORKING IN TRIBAL AREAS

Recognize the sovereignty and power of tribal nations, the unique legal and political powers that they bring, and the complex set of identities that tribal members simultaneously wear.

## 7. APPROPRIATELY MEASURE IMPACT AND CHANGE

Seek outcomes and benchmarks that reflect the scale, time frame, and aspirations of this rural community. Don't come with an urban lens of "bigger/more is better," as that may not be applicable in a rural context. Do not dictate what to measure. Work with diverse and non-traditional leaders and communities to define the progress indicators that make sense to them, and co-design anticipated outcomes.

## 8. EMBED PRINCIPLES IN THE FUNDER'S WORK, SYSTEMS AND CULTURE

Institutionalize language and behaviors within your philanthropic organization that internalize the regard for and respect of rural people and places. Scrutinize how all RFPs are worded; your efforts to hire diverse, inclusive, equity-driven, and competent staff; the choices of where to meet and convene; and how your communications implicitly/explicitly value/devalue rural places.

## 9. RECOGNIZE THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Recognize the long standing and critical contributions that immigrants and refugees make to rural communities, invest in their visions and organizations, and encourage rural communities to welcome these new members.

## 10. BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Build partnerships in the public sector, recognizing that local, state, and federal resources are critical to rural communities, but that government is often constrained by regulations, match requirements, and siloed funding.