

“Closing the Gap: Equity- and Culture-based Strategies for Creating Wealth in Rural America”

Two years ago NRFC reached its five year mark and turned a significant corner in its work. At that time, we had made more than \$3.3 million in grants to nearly 30 organizations/initiatives in twenty or more states and paused to reflect on our funding to date, the lessons learned and how we might improve impact on the ground. Taking a year to engage in strategic reflection (Spring 2005 – Spring 2006), we arrived at a new strategic plan and a revised theory of change:

“the reinvention of rural economies – ones with living wages, career ladder employment and jobs that respect the environment and the health and safety of employees – is fundamental to addressing extreme and persistent rural poverty and forging positive transformative change in rural America. NRFC understands that poverty is often a factor of race, class, culture, and power dynamics that are linked and concentrated.

Efforts aimed at poverty alleviation and wealth creation must first recognize that the work of building rural economies also entails confronting the structural barriers that foster racial disparities and discriminatory practices. Transforming extreme and persistently poor rural communities and regions into healthy and viable living environments will ultimately require the creation of a rural movement for social and economic equity – a convergence of grassroots efforts to envision, develop, implement, and monitor a policy context grounded in the newly emerging realities of rural life.

NRFC’s new direction lies at the nexus of economic development, movement, and transformative change. “

NRFC Strategic Plan, February 2006

In May of 2006, we held a national convening and consultation entitled, “Assets and Opportunities,” at which time we brought together more than 150 stakeholders – funders, practitioners, policy advocates, elected officials, researchers and others – to announce our revised theory of change and to review specially commissioned research by Michael Sherraden and his team at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis.

Since that time we have held regional conversations about asset-based economies that are geographically and culturally appropriate in our three regions of focus -- African American communities in the Mid South, Native American Communities in the Northern Plains and Immigrant and Farmworker Communities in California and the West – and at the beginning of 2007 identified a new set of sites and initiatives to fund in these regions. Our hope is that these initiatives will help to demonstrate the types of alternative, asset-based economies that can successfully begin to “close the gap” on wealth creation disparities and inequities by race and class, especially if they are able to “move to scale” and link to larger efforts in the region around community economic development, community philanthropy and policy advocacy.

This year we broaden the dialogue around these issues of reducing poverty, creating wealth and achieving racial equity. One of the ways, we hope to accomplish this is through the newly-created ***Rural Learning Network***, a collaborative effort with Neighborhood Funders Group, on the evening of Tuesday, May 6th at this year’s Council on Foundations Leadership Summit. Also at the leadership summit, NRFC will co-host with Annie E. Casey Foundation for the second year in a row, an Advanced Practice Institute for Rural Philanthropy, on the afternoon of Wednesday, May 7th at the Leadership Summit – this year focused on the challenges for rural families and workers in obtaining and maintaining reliable, affordable credit and what philanthropy can do to address issues of predatory lending, foreclosures and access to small business financing.

The other way of broadening this dialogue will be to host another round of regional discussions -- beginning in the early summer of this year and continuing into the spring of 2009 – around the theme of “closing the gap” and achieving racial equity through culture- and asset-based economic strategies. Our plan is to host one of these discussions in each of our regions of focus every couple of months through the end of the year and then hold a national, multi-regional conversation and convening in the Washington, D.C. area next spring. At that national event, we will shine a light on the progress of our funded initiatives in beginning to close the gap and achieve racial equity, along with other similarly focused work on the ground in other parts of rural America.

I invite you to keep up with these events via our website and hope that you can attend one or more of them, and in this way lend your voice and perspective in building momentum for closing the gap and achieving equity for families and communities of color in rural America.

All the best,
JR