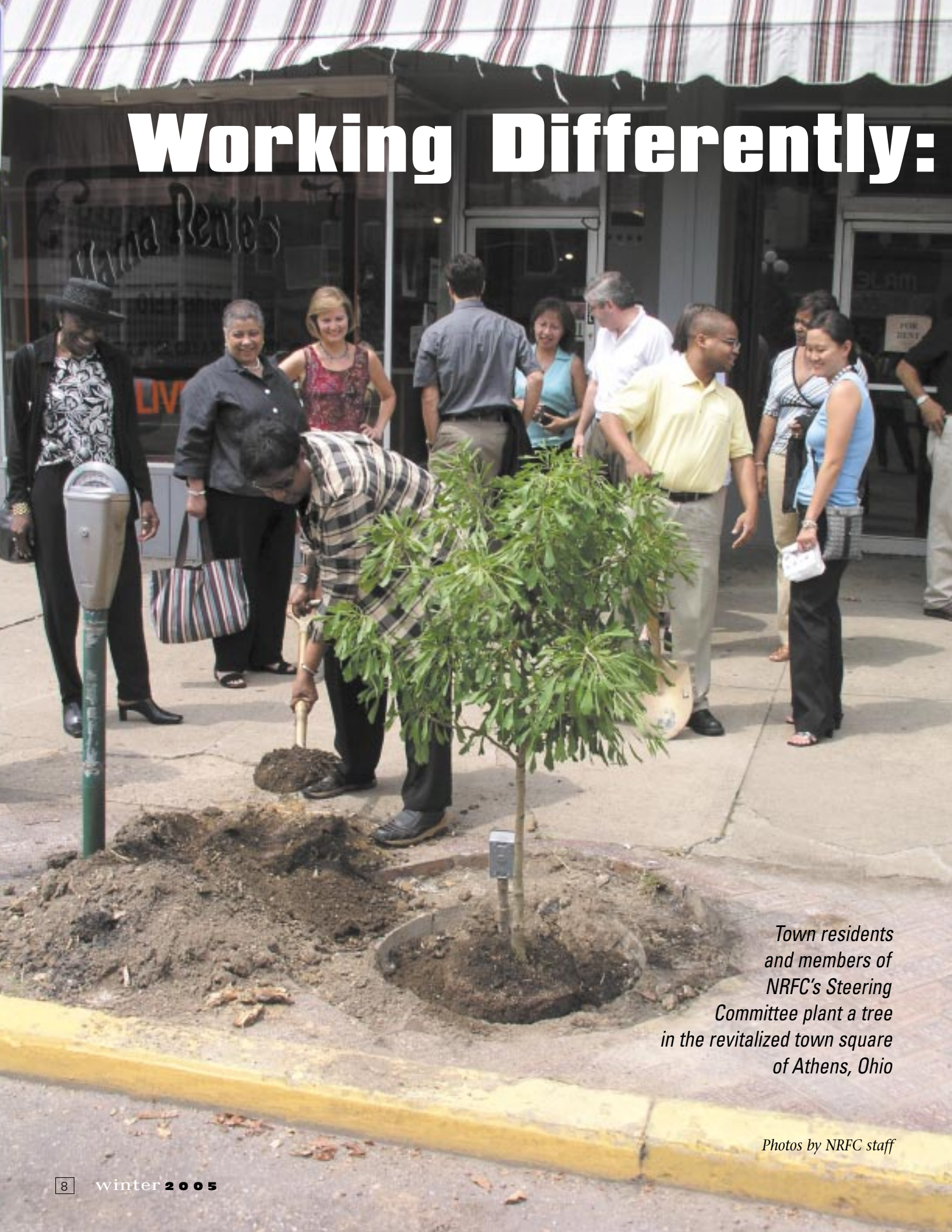


Working Differently:



Town residents and members of NRFC's Steering Committee plant a tree in the revitalized town square of Athens, Ohio

Photos by NRFC staff

The Challenge and Value of Collaboration for Community Change

By James A. Richardson Jr. and Stacy A. Caldwell

The National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC) is a philanthropic initiative designed to leverage \$100 million over a period of 10 years to support rural communities and families that face persistent poverty. Our vision is to share and leverage our collective knowledge and influence, as well as our dollars, for the purpose of expanding the availability and impact of the human, technical, and financial resources that are necessary for effecting and sustaining positive, measurable change. Recognizing that private philanthropy alone cannot meet this goal, we seek to enlarge the commitment to rural America by leveraging other public and private resources at local, regional, and national levels.

The Founders and Their Intent

A little more than three years ago, a group of seven national funders¹ banded together to form NRFC, with the aim of addressing these three questions:

- How can philanthropy work best in rural areas to address long-standing issues of persistent poverty?
- How can rural communities transform themselves in a sustainable way?



Members of NRFC's Learning Network: Liz Santagati, South Carolina Coastal Enterprises; Puanani Burges, Pua Foundation; Carla Gomez, Tapetas De Lana; Bettie Hodges, National Rural Funders

- How can a local, regional, and national dialogue be initiated to address systemic barriers to rural success?

Since then, NRFC has awarded more than \$3.5 million in grants to regional collaborative initiatives for community change, which in turn have leveraged more than \$32 million in additional grants, investments, and loans.

Along the way, NRFC has learned some valuable lessons about the challenges and the value of collaboration for rural community change. This article cites some of the reasons we remain committed to using a collaborative structure for our own decision-making and grant-making work, and the reasons we are also interested in learning from the collaborative experiences of our regional and national partners.

The Challenges of Working Differently 'From the Ground Up'

Although “collaboration” is often used as a general synonym for individuals or organizations working together, the term should be reserved for networked, coordinated, or cooperative organizations that have clearly defined objectives or outcomes to be realized over a specified period of time. In the case of NRFC, the agreement among our founding collaborators was to dedicate the initial decade of the 21st century (2001–2011) to raising visibility and expanding resources for rural regions of persistent poverty.

A unique aspect of NRFC’s work has been its insistence on inclusiveness and transparency from the outset. In essence, this has meant working “from the ground up”; that is, ensuring that at every step of development NRFC was inclusive of and transparent to those it exists to serve, namely, regional initiatives for lasting rural change.

This approach is evident in virtually every stage and aspect of NRFC’s work.

- In the earliest *planning and visioning*, the collaborative involved a twofold approach that included, first, a series of

stakeholder meetings that surveyed practitioners and funders working in rural communities of poverty, and, second, deliberations among the founding funders to draw on these stakeholder discussions to craft a set of values, a mission statement, and a plan of action.

- When initiating its *grant-making activities*, instead of developing a programmatic request for proposals, NRFC created an open “request for qualifications” through which applicant regional collaboratives could share with NRFC staff and funders what they defined as “rural,” the regional context in which they are working, and the collaborative strategies they are using to bring about lasting, measurable change. From the 284 responses received, NRFC was able to capture a snapshot of the innovations and current thinking about rural community development and use that collage of rural strategies as the basis for developing a broad set of ideas from which to frame a *learning network* in which funders, practitioners, and policymakers can participate as equals.
- Within a year of its formation, NRFC had expanded its *governance* structure to include not only strategic allies in the public policy and funding arenas but also on-the-ground practitioners, who are critical for grounding the collabora-



Learning Network partners share a joyful moment of song at NRFC’s 2005 Assembly

tive's work in the realities of community-based development in rural areas.²

- Since NRFC made its first selections of grantee partners, it has consistently worked with these on-the-ground partners to determine their evaluative capacities and craft an *evaluative framework* that builds on the diverse regions and strategies identified, while also developing a coherent analytical framework for understanding “rural community transformation”³ as a crosscutting phenomenon.

Throughout these four essential practices for collaboration, NRFC has worked to remain true to its commitment to inclusiveness and transparency. However, this organic and expansive approach to effecting and influencing community change brings with it several organizational challenges:

- Staying on task and avoiding mission creep.
- Effectively communicating new lessons and insights to various stakeholders to ensure consistent learning as the work progresses.
- Providing effective orientation to new governance members and rebuilding consensus as the governing body expands.
- Devising an effective evaluative methodology that can provide substantive feedback, as well as good will, to all.

Collaborations are especially vulnerable to these challenges precisely because they are more informal and more organic than other, more traditional organizational structures. Would-be collaborators, then, must be vigilant for these challenges and know when the merits of collaboration outweigh them.

Collaborative Models from the Field: The High Cost and the True Value of Success

One of the essential requirements for NRFC grant recipients has been that they demonstrate some history of successful regional collaboration, even if only on an informal basis. The underlying belief is that, despite the challenges, collaboration offers several unique advantages and value—especially for initiatives working to transform traditionally distressed or persistently poor rural areas.

Several reasons for undertaking the hard work of collaboration recommend themselves in the work of many of the regional initiatives that NRFC supports.

- **Multiple partners with complementary skills and expertise can shorten the learning curve and increase impact.** In the case of the Appalachian Ohio Regional Investment Coalition (AORIC), the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, ACENetworks, Rural Action, the Ohio Council for the Arts, and the University of Ohio have combined their distinctive skills and experience to develop a multifaceted regional

“Through dedication to a common purpose, collaborative partners are able to put individual agendas aside, establish deep and effective relationships of trust, and together realize new levels of accomplishment.”

strategy for enterprise development and increased entrepreneurial activity. In just three years, AORIC partners have identified 87 new entrepreneurs, fostered 42 new or expanding enterprises, established heritage tourism trails in 3 of 29 Appalachian counties, and convened more than 60 area festivals to work together toward self-sufficiency.

- **Multiple partners with their own resource bases and spheres of influence can have a multiplier effect in leveraging resources.** NRFC's collaborative partner in Alaska—Alaska Rural Community Health Economic Strategies (ARCHES)—has taken NRFC's original investment of \$300,000, matched it with funding from the Rasmuson Foundation (Alaska's largest private funder), and leveraged several million dollars in additional funding from state and national funding sources to fully cover the startup and training costs for expanding Alaska's village-based health provider system to include dental care, mental health/behavioral care, and eldercare in Alaska's remote Native villages. ARCHES partners—the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, the Denali Commission, the Alaska Mental Health Trust, and the University of Alaska—have combined their considerable resources and leverage to move the costly training phases of this initiative to early completion. Although the final implementation of the strategy will require congressional approval of Medicaid funds for reimbursement of these village-based health care positions (a step that was recently set back by the failure of the Indian Health Improvement Act to make it out of committee), this powerhouse collaboration is moving its strategy forward and will be ready to use its muscle to champion the needed allocation of federal funds another day.
- **Multiple partners with diverse experiences but common values can provide richer learning and a shared approach to addressing common challenges.** In the Rural Livelihoods Collaborative in New Mexico, co-managed by the New Mexico Community Foundation and the New Mexico Community Development Loan Fund, culturally based livelihoods as diverse as bison ranching on Picuris Pueblo, collective marketing of traditional arts in a Navajo co-op, a weaving collective in the northern New Mexico communities of Las Vegas and Mora, and a sewing coopera-

tive south of Albuquerque are participating in a rich learning experience in which each is bringing its unique insights and solutions to bear on common issues of building capacity, expanding resources, and creating more self-sufficient families through revitalization of these livelihoods. In time, these partners may discover together new strategies and mechanisms for developing much-needed capital to sustain and fuel these diverse initiatives.

“Collaborative partners inevitably fall back on a commonly held set of community values as the tie that binds them together.”

- **Multiple partners with developed constituencies and a common agenda can be effective in overcoming traditional obstacles to community change.** The South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations (SCACDC) and its member grassroots leaders and low-country community development organizations are making remarkable progress in overcoming a century and a half of class, racial, and economic barriers to creating wealth for African Americans in the South. SCACDC members are building community capacity in a straightforward manner—developing strong community-based organizations and leaders through regular workshops and technical assistance. SCACDC is breaking down barriers that have long kept African Americans in the South from fully participating in the American dream: The state legislature has recently authorized \$10 million in grants, loans, and tax credits for community economic development; area banks and corporations are responding with new mechanisms for access to capital; private funders in the state are for the first time embracing a statewide capacity-building agenda; and a new, higher level consortium of statewide nonprofit institutions—Clemson University, the South Carolina Association of Nonprofit Organizations, and Fair Share (a statewide policy advocate)—is emerging to work with SCACDC to enhance its efforts.

In each of these examples, collaboration has come at a very high cost and with setbacks along the way. Yet each is demonstrating progress that none of the individual partners could have achieved alone. Through their dedication to a common purpose, collaborative partners are able to put individual agendas aside, establish deep and effective relationships of trust, and together realize new levels of accomplishment.

Lessons Learned

Each of these regional collaborations for community change has a diverse array of organizational partners, chosen for their commitment to a shared vision and complementary skills and resources. These collaborative approaches are not always the most efficient or direct path to community change, but they outweigh the high transaction cost because of the added value achieved through their collective work: quicker learning/greater impact, greater leverage of resources, trust- and knowledge-building for lasting solutions, and greater influence in overcoming traditional or historic barriers.

More often than not, though, collaboration is not the product of careful planning but a response to strategic opportunities in the life-cycles of communities and regions; often, unlikely partners are thrown together into collaborative relationships without having taken the necessary first steps to ensure success. But even partnerships forged in the passion of a strategic moment can have lasting value if they move as quickly as possible to define shared outcomes or results and then work back to appropriate strategies and milestones for achieving and measuring success.

It is also important to recognize that the original vision from which a collaboration is born is frequently not the mature vision that will sustain it. Collaborative partners inevitably fall back on a commonly held set of community values as the tie that binds them together. ■

¹ The original funders were the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Fannie Mae Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, the F. B. Heron Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The following funders have joined the collaborative: the Otto Bremer Foundation, the California Endowment, the Ford Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and the Northwest Area Foundation. The Calvert Social Investment Foundation serves as fiscal sponsor for the National Rural Funders Collaborative.

² NRFC's public sector steering committee members are the Appalachian Regional Commission, the U. S. Department of Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its nonprofit collaborative partners are these five strategic collaboratives: Alaska Rural Community Health Economic Strategies (ARCHES), the Appalachian Ohio Regional Investment Coalition (AORIC), the Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship (CVP), the Rural Livelihoods Collaboration, and the South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations.

³ To learn more about the evaluative framework NRFC has developed in concert with its partners, visit www.nrfc.org.