

For Internal Distribution Only
National Rural Funders Collaborative

**FRAMEWORK FOR SITE VISIT CONVERSATIONS ABOUT
CAPACITY AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT**

As NRFC begins its second year of activity, it does so through a strategy of deeper engagement in which NRFC funders and practitioners explore key regional strategies (as represented in its strategic investments) in terms of envisioned outcomes, early thoughts about performance measures, necessary capitals/capacity for achieving those outcomes, and the underlying theories of rural community change. The following questions and framework for strategic inquiry should be used to guide this year’s site visit conversations, along with the attached Community Capital and Outcome Map(s).

I. Two Sides of a Common Question and the Implications for Collaboration

Practitioners: *What do we need to do to bring about change? What capitals do rural communities possess and what capacity must be developed to achieve envisioned outcomes?*

Funders: *What is the change rural communities seek to bring about? What performance measures and indicators are appropriate to rural community change?*

Implicit: *How and when is collaboration an effective investment strategy? How do we invest and who do we invest in to leverage community capital, increase capacity and achieve measurable outcomes?*

II. Multiple Theories of Strategic Rural Community Change

What is the theory of change at work behind NRFC’s strategic investments? What are the capitals we have to build to be ready to achieve the outcomes and take advantage of opportunities?

How and under what conditions does it work best to bring about change? How do we become more strategic in choice of outcomes and the partners with whom we will collaborate to achieve them?

How do we create and take advantage of strategic opportunities for rural community change?

Moving toward a model of “strategic engagement” and “strategic readiness.”

III. Increasing Leverage and Impact; Pursuing Policy Change

What are the core outcomes, capitals and capacity needs/opportunities for the rural strategy/theory of change at hand?

What are the identifiable gaps and opportunities? How can performance be measured and what are the indicators of progress toward outcomes?

What are the strategic opportunities and leverage/expansion points in the near term and how can NRFC be helpful in exploiting those?

What are next steps in the relationship?

For Internal Distribution Only
National Rural Funders Collaborative

A. 2003 SITE VISIT OBJECTIVES

NRFC is conducting 2nd year site visits in April and May to its first four strategic investment sites: New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina and Alaska. The purpose of the visits is twofold: **(1) strategic engagement**, and **(2) performance measurement**.

1. Strategic Engagement:

As a way of calling attention to the work of NRFC's strategic investment partners/ multi-year grantees, the NRFC site visit team will use the participation of NRFC and its partners (private funders, public partners and practitioners) to engage key regional colleagues, potential funders and political contacts in ways that will serve the strategic interests of the regional collaborations funded. In each case a team consisting of NRFC funders, public agency representatives, and a practitioner or two from at least one other site will meet with area funders, state officials, grassroots leaders and others – in order to learn from regional stakeholders, share the experiences and mission of NRFC and draw attention to the vision and strategy of NRFC's strategic regional partners working in collaboration. In this way, NRFC hopes both to deepen the understanding of the context for the regional work and to lend its thinking, influence and support to encourage area stakeholders to expand their support for this work.

2. Performance Measurement:

NRFC will also use this visit to begin a process with its strategic investment partners/ leaders of the regional collaborative to discuss their distinctive regional approach and strategy, to better understand the desired outcomes and theory of change which underly that approach and strategy, to provide some feedback on performance-to-date and to begin to more clearly articulate performance measures appropriate to the work. This is the beginning of NRFC's participatory evaluation process for its multi-year grantees, in order to understand how best to support and strengthen these and other strategies and collaborations for rural community change. Dr. Cornelia (Neal) Butler Flora, Professor of Sociology and Community Development at Iowa State and Director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (one of four USDA-supported, land-grant university-based centers to support the extension service and rural communities with research, training and educational needs), will facilitate this part of the visit. As part of the documentation of these visits, Bettie Hodges also joins the team to capture the human stories that are part of the success and to provide overall documentation to the visits themselves. Together, these two professionals are helping us capture both the scientific and artistic aspects of the regional work. Findings of these site visits will be published in the fall in a special issue of *Rural Connections*.

For Internal Distribution Only
National Rural Funders Collaborative

B. NRFC EVALUATION MODEL: “STRATEGIC READINESS”

After extensive discussion with grantees, funders and professionals in the field, NRFC has set out to build an evaluation model that focuses on *the relationship between building capacity and measuring performance*. In actuality, these are two sides of the same coin funder invests and the practitioner spends. From the **practitioners’ viewpoint**, outcome achievement and measurement are tied to capacity: *“What capacity must be built or developed within rural areas or regions to enable them effectively to achieve desired outcomes and take advantage of current and future strategic opportunities?”* From the **funders perspective**, capacity building must be grounded in achievable, sustainable and measurable outcomes: *“What are those achievable outcomes and strategic opportunities critical to economic revitalization, leadership development and improvement in quality of life for which rural communities, leaders and families must be ready and capable of realizing?”* In a word, the new model evolving is one of *“strategic readiness.”*

This model draws upon and is built from NRFC’s threefold learning framework for understanding rural community change evolving from interactions and conversations with its grantees, funders and policy allies:

- *building wealth* (regional economic development and entrepreneurship);
- *building leadership* (empowering grassroots, indigeneous leadership and transforming/strengthening mediating rural institutions); and
- *building self-sufficient families* (improving quality of life for rural families and children through increased civic participation and through strengthening social supports and networks).

This strategic readiness model, then, is focused on understanding the types of *community capital* that contribute to community change and how those “capitals” are transformed into *capacity for achieving desired outcomes and taking advantage of strategic opportunities*.

This emerging model is informed by Dr. Cornelia Butler Flora’s six types of community capital¹ -- three of which might be considered to be “indigenous” community capital (the environment, culture and basic human ability) – or the “basic stuff” *from which communities are built* -- and the other three of which are “developed” capital (economic wealth, political power and social networks) – or the stuff *with which indigenous community capitals are translated and transformed into capacity*.

To use NRFC’s learning framework, then, the capacity-building model for rural community transformation looks like this:

- *building wealth (economic capital) = increasing capacity for individual and community economic self-determination – especially in the forms of individual and social entrepreneurship;*

¹ See Dr. Flora’s presentation at NRFC’s midterm event in Santa Fe, which can be found at www.nrfc.org under [Notes from Mid-Term Learning Event on Outcomes/Measures & Rural Policy \(January 2003\)](#). Dr. Flora is Director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development and [Charles F. Curtiss Distinguished Professor of Agriculture and Sociology](#) at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. She is currently also working as lead consultant to NRFC for developing its model for understanding rural community change and the corresponding “strategic readiness” model for outcome/performance measurement.

For Internal Distribution Only
National Rural Funders Collaborative

- ***building leadership (political capital)*** = increasing capacity for empowering grassroots leaders and for developing/sustaining key mediating institutions – especially in the forms of creating more diverse leadership structures and more dynamic and transformative institutions for change, such as community-based foundations, community development financial institutions and community or tribal colleges; and
- ***building self-sufficient families (social capital)*** = increasing capacity for improving quality of life—especially through increased civic participation, strengthened social supports and networks and greater access to services.

As a preliminary hypothesis for understanding rural community transformation, NRFC is now focused on the interrelationship of individual/community capital development (in those three areas outlined above) and increasing capacity for achieving sustainable community change. The implication of this model for understanding ***outcome or performance measurement*** is that identification of appropriate metrics for rural community change or transformation is not simply a matter of defining static “***outcomes***” to be achieved at some imprecise point in time in the future, but is also a matter of identifying “***indicators of increased individual/community capacity***” for achieving those outcomes in the future.

Early site visits and discussions with NRFC grantees suggest that ***specific outcomes and measures may be quite variable from location to location – in many ways they are context dependent***. It may not be possible to develop a definitive set of outcomes and measures by which every strategy for rural community change can be measured. A more fruitful endeavor may be to identify a ***common set of indicators for increased community capacity*** necessary for the achievement of any number of outcomes that are presupposed by various rural strategies nationwide.

But even this model of “building individual/community capacity for achieving desired outcomes” seems less than adequate when considering that “outcome achievement” is always a matter of *more or less* when measured against an abstract standard. Increasing capacity is also about ***preparing rural communities and families for greater self-determination, for recognizing and being able to “capitalize” on current and future “opportunities” – whether anticipated or not. “Strategic readiness.”*** then, is “***the capacity of rural individuals, communities and regions to translate their inherent assets into increased ability to achieve desired community outcomes and to act upon current and future opportunities – anticipated and unanticipated.***”

This is the emerging evaluative framework in which is working to engage its grantee/learning partners in a dialogue, or process of participatory evaluation, in which ***desired outcomes and requisite capacities can be more clearly articulated, more efficiently achieved and built, and more dynamically employed as future ability to recognize and seize strategic opportunities for greater self-determination and sustainable growth.***

Additionally, NRFC is interested in the process for outcome achievement and opportunity realization and not the product or measurement only. This ongoing task of participatory evaluation will also ask about ***the process of collaboration*** in each of these regional instances. In particular, NRFC seeks to know ***when*** collaboration in rural areas is efficient and effective in delivering capacity development, outcome achievement and readiness for opportunities that could not have otherwise been achieved, or not otherwise achieved on a scale resulting in sustainable community/regional change.