

NRFC Assembly of Network Partners Offers Promising Strategies for “Rural Community Transformation”

How can rural communities and regions overcome their impoverished past and transform themselves into vibrant examples of determination and hope?

At its recent 3rd Annual Assembly, the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC) network of partners and allies met to share ideas, expertise and experience on the subject of “transforming rural communities” from pockets of persistent poverty to vibrant centers for revitalization and renewal. More than 120 community leaders, nonprofit representatives, elected officials and program officers from private philanthropic foundations from diverse sections of rural America met July 27-29 near Cambridge, Ohio — in the heart of Appalachian Ohio to learn from one another.

Established in 2001, NRFC seeks to expand resources for rural families and communities facing persistent poverty by leveraging \$100 million over 10 years in new and untapped funds to meet this challenge. Annually NRFC hosts an assembly of its network partners – practitioners, funders, public policy advocates and administrators – working together to bring about lasting, measurable change throughout Rural America.

This year’s theme, “*Transforming Rural Communities of Poverty: Building the Field through Practice, Philanthropy and Policy*,” drew participants from areas as diverse as Alaska, Appalachian Ohio, the South Carolina low country, the Northern Great Plains, New Mexico’s pueblos and Hawaii’s pacific islands. This culturally and ethnically diverse group met together to articulate their distinctive regional challenges and also to share strategies and best practices that could be helpful to one another.

Day one of the Assembly focused was on improving rural “practice,” on successful strategies and models for an asset-based approach to rural community transformation. Accordingly, keynote speaker Richard McCarthy, director of the

Economics Institute at Twomey Center for Peace through Justice at Loyola University in New Orleans, described the challenges and successes of small farmers in south Louisiana and surrounding areas in developing a community-owned and managed “farmers market” to bring fresher, healthier foods to area grocers and restaurateurs. Establishing this open market has forged more direct and equitable relationships between producers and retailers and brought superior products to consumers.

Barbara Wyckoff-Baird of the Aspen Institute in Washington D.C., spoke about recent collaborations between resource conservation interests and forest communities to harvest timber in a “sustainable” way, bringing about more just relationships among community, nature and economic development interests.

Smaller breakout sessions gave assembly participants the opportunity to study in more depth other models of NRFC-supported strategies for transforming rural communities and regions. They included:

- The Black Family Land Trust in the rural South, which is working to restore family lands to African-American families while developing more inclusive leadership structures in the communities overseeing those lands.
- The Hawaii Alliance for Community Based Economic Development, which is working to nurture and mentor small community efforts to replant traditional agricultural land and restore coastal fishponds so that they produce products that sustain family economic success as well as traditional Hawaiian family values.
- Central Valley Partnership, which is harnessing the collaborative power of more than 20 nonprofit organizations in a 400-mile stretch more than half the length of California. The goal is to develop cultural alliances and multi-cultural leadership that can best serve present and future interests of the diverse immigrant and agricultural worker populations in the region.
- A statewide collaborative effort in rural Alaska, which is dedicated to improving access to health care through a village-based health provider model while also creating sustainable jobs for native village residents.

As a symbol of their connectedness — despite geographical and cultural differences — assembly participants were invited to bring something of themselves and their land to a common bowl of “community wealth” at the end of the first day. In a ceremony called *Nana I Ke Kumu* (“Look to the Source”), Puanani Burgess of the Pu'a Foundation in Hawaii invited participants to pour water they had brought from their home areas into the common bowl. She noted that the Hawaiian word for water — *wai* — when stated emphatically as *wai wai*, means “wealth,” or the source of all life. “By combining our waters together, they can never be separated but represent the wealth we bring with us from our diverse communities and share with one another as a shared asset,” she said. Capturing the essence of rural community transformation, this ceremony emphasized the “asset-based” or “community wealth” approach to community building shared by all of the strategies represented at the assembly.

The focus on the second day of the assembly was on the roles of philanthropy and policy in transforming rural communities. A panel of three NRFC funders described their institutions’ efforts to move beyond unengaged models of philanthropy to more dynamic roles that support and collaborate with those they help and those who make policies affecting rural communities.

Mario Gutierrez, director of the Agricultural Worker/Binational Health Program at the California Endowment, discussed programs like the endowment’s Agricultural Worker Health Initiative, designed to move away from “emotionally based” grantmaking and toward true partnership with communities to achieve lasting, systemic change based on demonstrable needs and actual data.

Chris Perez, program officer at the F.B. Heron Foundation, used the metaphor of a glacier to describe the potential foundations had for spurring tremendous and lasting change by leveraging financial resources beyond the 5 percent of assets required of foundations in their distribution of grants.. “Foundations are required to pay out 5 percent of their assets in grant-making each year, but this is only the 5 percent of the

glacier we can see above the surface,” Perez said. “But there is much more below the surface. The power lies in what is submerged.” He said foundations should use their financial power in non-traditional ways, such as increasing the portion of their portfolios devoted to socially responsible investment and making direct loans to organizations that support their mission.

Gladys Washington, senior program officer with the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, discussed relationships between the foundation and grantees in the 12 southeastern states served by the Babcock Foundation. The relationships between grantee communities and foundations often represent a power imbalance, she noted. “Communities are often asking the foundation what it wants, when instead foundations should be asking communities what they want and need,” she said. “Building strategic relationships of trust takes time. It’s all about true partnerships, and this requires learning, truth and the sharing of needs, experiences and wisdom.”

In the breakout sessions on philanthropy, investment and resource development, creative ideas were shared by a wide range of NRFC partners:

- Leaders from the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio, Nebraska Community Foundation and the New Mexico Community Foundation discussed their experiences in making a community foundation an agent for community change and leverage.
- Speakers from NRFC, Hindsight Consulting, Pu'a Foundation, and the Rural Community College Initiative shared alternative strategies for increasing philanthropic participation in rural communities of poverty and color.
- Presenters from the Calvert Foundation, Coastal Enterprises and AceNetworks discussed alternative strategies for developing investment capital.
- Expanding regional capacity by tapping into the knowledge and resources of community colleges was discussed by representatives from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Hawaii Community College, College of Rural Alaska, Eastern New Mexico University, and the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

Chuck Fluharty, director of the Rural Policy Research Institute, encouraged participants to focus on ways regional interests could work together to influence policy-making. “Get some big ideas and sell them,” he urged. “And (undertake) some really meaningful, impactful local initiatives – however small – that play into big ideas.... Small ideas can be made to reflect what needs to happen in national policy. With state budgets healing and a new congressional session ahead, there are opportunities for policy change in the near term future.”

More equitable policies, Fluharty and other participants noted, can bring about a new vision and economic resurgence for rural areas suffering from prolonged disinvestment and neglect. Participants resolved that future convenings of the NRFC network would focus on helping them build effective policy strategies and connect to key policy partners.

At the end of the assembly, two visible expressions of its meaning and import remained. First, an 8’ by 10’ tapestry of multi-colored ribbon sewn by Carla Gomez, executive director of Tapetes de Lana, in New Mexico, a weaving collaborative of low wealth individuals – along with other weavers from Tapetes – was created during the course of the assembly as a symbol of the weaving together the diverse ideas and threads of rural community transformation throughout the two-day event. . Gomez described how weaving had changed her life and the lives of many people around her. Six years ago, she had been teaching weaving in a one-room schoolhouse with no running water. Her concern for a single mother in need of career skills inspired her to form a nonprofit, and today she has more than \$1 million in funding and is developing a fiber mill. More than 40 people are now employed by her weaving business. This event tapestry is an enduring symbol of the various threads that NRFC partners and communities bring to the whole tapestry in order to create a new, vibrant, strong and sustainable Rural America.

Second, Appalachia Ohio itself and the work of NRFC’s Appalachian partner, Appalachian Ohio Regional Investment Coalition (AORIC), remain as visible

expressions both of the historic fate of “persistent poverty” experienced by many rural communities and regions, and also of the opportunities for rebirth and revitalization that many of these communities are creating for themselves. AORIC – a regional collaboration consisting of the Foundation for Appalachia Ohio, Appalachia Center for Enterprise Networks (ACENet), Rural Action, Appalachia Ohio’s Council for the Arts, and the Governor’s Office for Appalachia Ohio — is working to overcome this 29-county region’s plight of having been stripped of its rich coal deposits, timber forests and other natural assets and replacing it with a new, more entrepreneurial approach to building upon these same natural assets and creating more sustainable resource-based industries, along with an increasing number of area festivals, cultural tourism trails and community art projects.

Perhaps the most powerful expression of both the challenge of overcoming rural poverty and the success of many rural areas in transforming themselves was voiced by Bettie Hodges, lead facilitator for the event, who tied together major themes and ideas from the assembly’s many rich discussions. “We can’t liberate people, but must allow people to speak for themselves and empower them to do so,” Hodges said. “We should always be about ‘people building’ and should not prejudge who our allies or foes might be. Put your differences aside and work together on things you have in common..”

NRFC partners left the Ohio gathering to return to their various communities of place – refreshed, recharged, and with some new visions for the future. Each returned to continue reweaving the fabric of their unique regional strengths, bringing together new ideas and old traditions, bolstered by a vision of a more expansive philanthropy and more supportive community-based policy. Together this growing network of practitioners, philanthropists and policy makers moves forward with a new sense of being connected by a common commitment to transform the fabric of rural America into a stronger, more vibrant, self-sustaining whole.