

# Bringing Rural and Tribal Leaders Together to Advance Shared Economic Mobility Goals

This spotlight is part of a [series](#) summarizing six “build & learn” pilots launched in 2024 to explore how field building could take shape in different settings and impact domains. Developed with trusted field partners, the pilots focused on bringing actors together to spur efforts that would have otherwise not emerged or been slow to develop. They were designed to catalyze meaningful impact while generating insight to inform a broader field-building strategy.

## THE CHALLENGE

Rural and Tribal communities in the US often lack access to capital for the long-term infrastructure and economic development needed to combat decades of disinvestment. These communities were disproportionately impacted by both the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic and have been slower to recover than other communities in the US.

Although recent federal legislation (including the CHIPS and Inflation Reduction Acts) has provided more targeted funding for rural areas, many rural and Tribal communities have difficulty accessing these funds. It has been particularly challenging for advocates from these communities to access funding from philanthropy and the nonagricultural public sector. In addition, rural and Tribal organizations often lack the full-time staff and technical resources found in capital-rich urban areas, which sometimes receive philanthropic support to help fund these essential capacities.

Economic conditions in both rural and Tribal areas differ significantly from those of urban contexts. However, rural and Tribal groups differ in many important respects and do not regularly collaborate to identify and advance shared interests. Especially for communities living on reservation land, legal conditions and structures of governance often differ enough to make collaboration seem impossible. In addition, distrust often prevails in these communities, given the history of violence, displacement, and theft Tribal communities experienced. This leads to missed opportunities for joint action (rural and neighboring Tribal governments, for example), peer-to-peer learning (the

Appalachia region to the Navajo Nation, for example), and multisectoral coalitions.

Working in a coalition around shared interests could amplify the voices of both rural and Tribal advocates, creating opportunities to jointly push for more investment and favorable policies to advance their own vision for economic success, power, and dignity.

## THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot project aspires to bring rural and Tribal actors together to identify shared needs, especially in accessing federal funding. It supports them in developing a shared agenda and narrative, providing the foundation for a long-term, viable coalition that can drive policy and investment changes to advance their communities' priorities.

## THE FIRST STEP

The steering committee approved an initial investment of \$150,000 to help identify common priorities and a shared agenda linking rural and Tribal organizations. These resources were used to

- **conduct interviews and small group conversations** with organizations representing communities,
- **report findings on common themes and narratives** and a potential shared framework for coalition building, and
- **identify needed technical assistance and other partners** to help connect and strengthen actionable connections between rural and Tribal organizations.

Leveraging existing data, previous interviews, and a general understanding of rural community needs, interviews focused on the unique, underreported needs of Tribal organizations and leaders. Because Native leaders expressed that they are often underrepresented in similar efforts, participants in group conversations were representatives of Tribal organizations or Native individuals representing broader rural organizations with significant Tribal/Native programming.

“ It’s important to recognize that when you have seen one Tribal nation, you have only seen one Tribal nation, and every Tribal community has its own unique resources and capabilities. This makes ‘cookie cutter’ funding difficult, especially when they are suited to towns or for non-Native community structures. Tribal leaders often have to decide which opportunities they should pursue that generate the greatest community impact and that can sometimes lead to leaving money on the table.

—David Flemming, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

## PARTNERS

Resource Rural was the lead partner for this pilot project. Its mission is to leverage billions of dollars from existing federal programs to serve the needs and priorities of rural communities. It partnered with Roanhorse Consulting, a Native-led specialist firm, and United South and Eastern Tribes, a nonprofit intra-Tribal organization representing 33 Tribes.

Tony Pipa (Brookings Institution), Kimber Lanning (Local First Arizona), and Erik Stegman (Native Americans in Philanthropy) shaped and stewarded this pilot. Melonie Tharpe (Common Future) provided planning and logistical support.

## LESSONS LEARNED

This pilot initially sought to build a sustainable coalition of rural and Tribal organizations, increasing the voice and power of both to shift resources on their own terms. However, insights from initial convenings have shifted how organizations involved are likely to approach the work. The following lessons emerged:

- **Unique Tribal needs must be identified and centered.** Tribal communities are traditionally invited to the table after initial planning, project scoping, or even a funding mechanism has been designed, which does not account for their unique cultural, historical, and even legal structures. Economic plans and solutions that focus on individual wealth and economic growth do not fit Tribal needs and plans but are often the only option in collaborative work with rural neighbors. At best, many Tribal leaders feel they have to compromise their values on projects, and at worst they encounter discriminatory responses when they express the values and needs of Native communities.
- **Specialized technical assistance is needed for securing resources.** Tribal participants verified that, much like other rural communities, they require additional philanthropic capital and support to effectively secure federal funding. However, they identified their unique governance structures and legal needs as additional impediments to successfully accessing funding. Therefore, they prioritize technical assistance providers who are Tribal specialists.
- **Coalitions should be trauma-informed, Native-first.** To ensure success and right historical wrongs, Tribes pushed for coalition work that allowed them to build and lead tables, inviting rural neighbors and collaborators in only as trust was established and as expanding the coalition made sense. They saw the need for better historical knowledge, trauma-informed approaches, and general education of their rural neighbors.

- **Actionable goals should build on what is working.**  
Tribal participants were very interested in communities of practice and coalitions that could build power and results. They wanted to build or otherwise work with spaces that offered peer support, access to expertise, and opportunities to drive action to make change.
- **Native-led intermediaries are underrepresented.**  
Too often, when Tribal communities do access philanthropic or federal funding, the capital is moved to a third-party intermediary that is not Native-led. This was seen as a form of discrimination and/or racism.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Building on the insights and recommendations generated by the first step in this pilot, Resource Rural and Native Americans in Philanthropy are exploring next steps. A full report on findings has been compiled and released to participants, and lessons learned will be shared with audiences of interest.

Native participant feedback has significantly altered earlier plans for a community of practice or cohort model bringing rural and Tribal leaders together to share best practices and build collaboration. Because none of the steering committee members' organizations are Native-led, discussions also continue about where and how a potential community of practice or coalition should be built and housed.

“ *It's got to be something that's living and relevant to our communities. The brain power, talent, and ability to get things done is in our communities. The knowledge base to solve the challenges we face are inherent assets we can build on to create wealth and well-being.*

—Rafael Tapia, Local First Arizona