

# Creating a Network of Young Tribal and Rural Leaders in Economic Mobility

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

For decades, rural and Tribal communities in the US have suffered from disinvestment and neglect, both economically and politically. Rural and Tribal economies differ significantly from those of urban contexts, but too often these differences are not fully understood or acknowledged. Furthermore, the interests of rural and Tribal communities are ignored or treated as an afterthought in debates and decisions about policy, funding, and implementation.

Advocates for rural communities argue that their needs are misunderstood by policymakers, considered “uninvestable,” and not seen as part of the future of the national economy. These leaders seek tailored solutions, responsive to their social, economic, and political realities and the priorities of the residents they serve.

Young people can play central roles in shaping these solutions, advancing a vision for the future of their communities, building partnerships with peers from other rural and Tribal contexts, and bringing their voices to national deliberations about policy and practice. However, most national alliances implement top-down youth engagement strategies and do not center rural and Tribal youth, leaving them out of policy and power-building strategies.

## THE GOAL

This build & learn pilot project seeks to create a network of rural and Tribal youth leaders that connects them to peers in other communities. It aspires to engage and empower new voices to craft a youth-led vision for economic mobility and influence other established networks to build a new narrative of mobility in rural and Tribal places.

## THE FIRST STEP

The steering committee approved an initial investment of \$225,000 to begin engaging rural and Tribal youth and assess their priorities for the future:

- **Seven groups of rural and Tribal youth received leadership training**, insights about key economic issues, and an invitation to help shape a larger convening.
- **Forty majority-BIPOC youth and local organizers from six areas convened** for an in-person gathering.
- **Steering committee members shared knowledge, vision, and principles** and listened and learned from the perspectives of the young people living in rural and Tribal communities.

The youth engaged in this build & learn expressed strong interest in meeting again and working together toward a sustainable program or coalition centering diverse, young Tribal and rural voices in economic visioning and systems change. Therefore, the steering committee approved an additional \$180,000 to Clear Creek Creative to help plan and facilitate a convening.

## PARTNERS

Clear Creek Creative, an arts, cultural, and community organizing team located in Appalachia, was the lead partner for this engagement. It engaged seven arts and culture leaders already working with young people in rural and Tribal communities in

Alaska

Hawaii

Kentucky

Mississippi (Delta & Jackson)

Oregon

Washington

Wyoming

Steering committee members Dreama Gentry (Partners for Rural Impact) and Solana Rice (Liberation in a Generation) shaped and stewarded this pilot project. Melonie Tharpe (Common Future) provided planning and logistical support.

“ I've long felt a loneliness and longing for affinity and co-conspirators to offer our gifts & magic to community.

—Youth participant in the first convening

## LESSONS LEARNED

This pilot aims to empower rural and Tribal young people to engage meaningfully in local, state, and national advocacy and action; gain a greater understanding of their priorities and needs; and begin developing a national network of youth and their supporters who serve as connectors and facilitators. The following lessons emerged:

- Rural organizing and outreach are often led by individuals or small organizations that **lack access to funding, space, and logistical support** to meet and build partnerships.

- Although some existing youth forums and gatherings include rural and/or Tribal youth, the agendas and programming are often top-down and do not **invite the youth to co-build the agenda or center themselves as leaders.**
- The Mobility Alliance [vision and guiding principles](#) resonate with rural and Tribal youth who want to adapt the economic rights framework into a more specific and **measurable framing to hold policymakers and other authorities accountable.**
- Local organizers would benefit from a ready-made **shared agenda** but would need to adapt it to local contexts to ensure local support.

“ Hearing stories about what each other care about and who we are bringing with us, supporting, advocating for at home. Group visioning was powerful to witness.

—Youth participant in the first convening

## LOOKING AHEAD

Partners for Rural Impact has committed to championing this effort and will develop a **field-building fellowship** for rural and Tribal youth leaders. To build a new narrative of upward mobility in rural and Tribal spaces, this effort will develop a network of young leaders across communities, establish a youth-led vision for economic mobility, build power and voice into their solutions, and influence other established networks. This is intended to empower future leaders in rural and Tribal communities with a deep understanding of navigating economic systems change, and to seed an initiative centering diverse, young rural and Tribal voices in economic visioning and systems change.