October 2026

STRONG FOUNDATIONS FOR RURAL ADVANCEMENT





Rural Realities

- Rural geographies are highly productive contributors to national and global wealth, and rural development practice is flourishing.

- Yet rural communities face real headwinds: macroeconomic policy decisions made without them, economies built around a single industry or employer, an increasingly consolidated economy, and the lasting legacy of discrimination.

- Too often, wealth continues to be extracted from the very people and places producing it for the nation.

- “Rural” as an economic space is synonymous with development inequalities that disproportionately impact communities of color, persistent-poverty regions, and Tribal Nations, alongside a broader set of rural communities affected by industrial restructuring, disinvestment, and demographic change—all of them holding untapped potential.



The Ultimate Goal

Investment and opportunity for each and every rural person to live their best life

Essential Predictor: Thriving, prosperous rural places

How? Rural communities retain the value they create.

What Will This Take? Strengthening the field infrastructure, relationships, and collective power so that rural communities are better able to shape systems and narratives and influence policy and investments.

What Is Strong Foundations for Rural Advancement?

1. An **assessment of the current landscape and capacity for systems change** across existing rural community economic development actors.

1. An **opportunity for relationship building**, **better alignment and coalition-building** across the current U.S. rural development ecosystem.

1. A **strategic framework** for **investing in effective rural systems-change infrastructure**



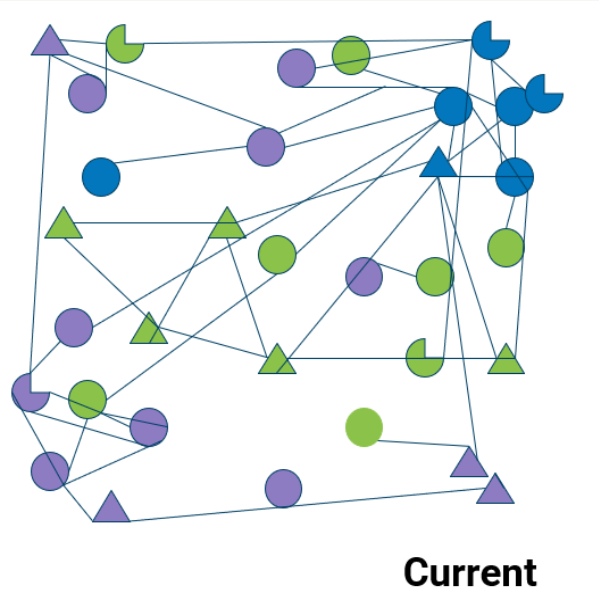
SFRA Assumptions

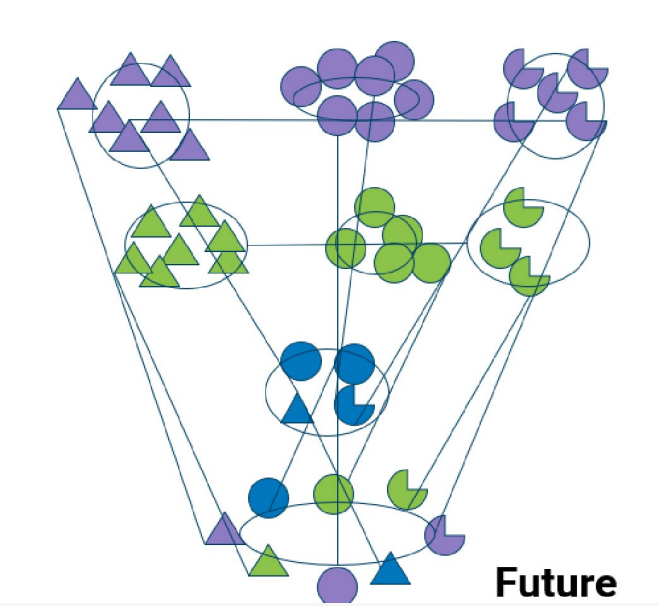
1. **Systemic change** is the only way to truly accelerate the development energies of rural America in way that reaches the full breadth and diversity of rural people and places.

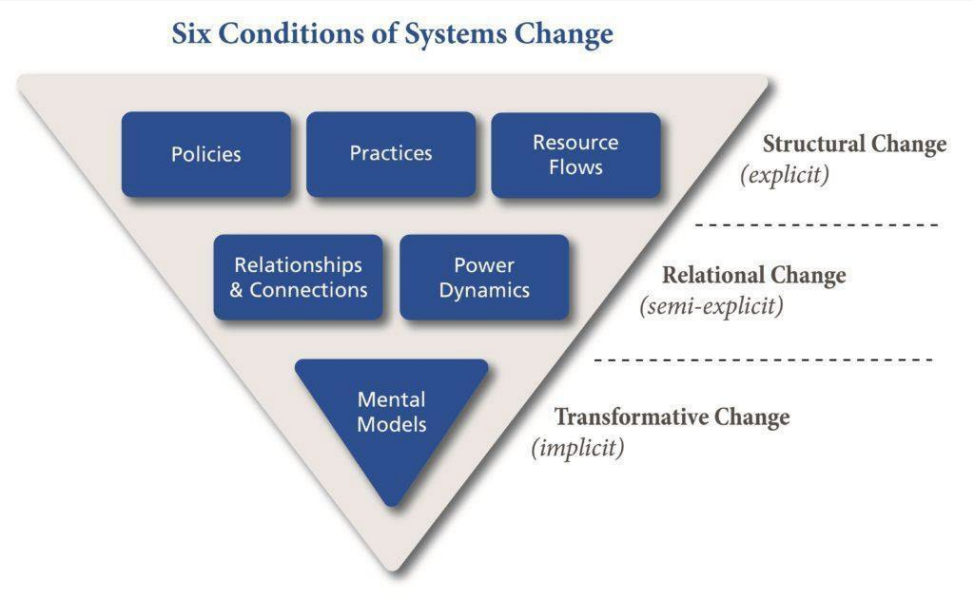
2. Systemic change depends on **working to align rural voices** across sectors, geographies, political boundaries, and federal/tribal/state/local levels of governance to build a shared vision, institutional relevance, and power at a meaningful scale.



The Systems Problem







Current

- High Activity
- Low Alignment

Future

- High Activity
- High Alignment

Bottom Line

- More programs or rural actors is insufficient.
- The goal is greater alignment, stronger connections, more power, better policies, locally-owned narrative change, and more capital.

WHY SFRA NOW?

An extraordinary convergence of pressures:

STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS
Historic extraction & structural underinvestment, siloed, technology disruptions, labor shortages, housing & childcare shortages, health care gaps, fragmented policy systems, fewer service providers, farm economy stress.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION
AI + data centers
Energy + infrastructure
Ownership & business succession
Changing capital flows

POLICY ENVIRONMENT
Time of significant disruption (e.g. trade, energy, environmental policy, Medicaid + SNAP cuts/changes);
State cost burden shifts, fiscal & administrative uncertainty for states, local governments, non-profits and businesses.

PUBLIC ATTENTION
Rural is having a 'moment'—let's harness it into a **movement**.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & GOVERNANCE

16 -Month Stakeholder Consultation & Arc

A collaborative initiative engaging rural practitioners and national philanthropic partners to shape a shared vision for systems-level change.

50+
FIELD LEADERS

16
MONTHS

1
VISION & STRATEGY

1

Steering Committee Oversight

Guided process and research design with input from eight specialist contributors.

2

Interviews & Field Survey

Conducted nearly 20 interviews and issued a field survey to better understand the landscape and perspectives on systems change.

3

Two Small Convenings, December 2025 & March 2026

Convened approximately 16 rural development leaders virtually (December) and in Washington D.C. (March) for strategic input.

4

Denver National Working Session, June 2026

Convened ~40 leaders in-person alongside an adjacent national funder's forum (Kellogg, CoBank, Heron, RWJF).

5

Synthesis & Field Strategy Paper

Synthesized data from 50+ practitioners into a final roadmap for capacity and field building.

Final Report

Crafted strategic paper establishing a shared vision and framework for rural systems change.

GREATER CAPACITY FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE REQUIRES: :

SFRA is organized around six essential systems roles — and the infrastructure needed to bridge gaps between them.

1. CAPACITY & LEADERSHIP

2. VOICE & ADVOCACY

3. POLICY & STRATEGY

4. RESEARCH & DATA

5. NARRATIVE CHANGE

6. PHILANTHROPY & FUNDERS



STRATEGY TO GUIDE PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENTS

Short-Term Recommendations

- Planning grants to advance nascent systems change efforts.
- Capacity grants to strengthen existing entities.
- Secure a minimum of $20 million in new, previously-unplanned investments especially from national philanthropy (or high-net-worth individuals) that is focused specifically on building the field of rural development and increasing the capacity for policy and systems change.

Mid-Term Recommendations

- Align and capitalize funding infrastructure.
- Secure a minimum of $100 million in new, previously-unplanned investments (over 5-years), especially from national philanthropy (or high-net-worth individuals) that is focused specifically on systems change.

Long-Term Recommendations

- Sustain systemic investments for the long-haul that result in meaningful increases in philanthropic investment and a measurable increase in public and private investment in rural communities.



STRATEGY TO GUIDE PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENTS

Immediate Actions

1. **Capitalize & resource existing organizations and networks**
2. **Planning grants**
   - Rural Policy Institute
   - Rural Data Cooperative
3. **Grants that support collaboration, field building, and SFRA recommended actions**
4. **Field-building and coordination across RECD**
5. **Grow and deepen the network(s) of regional, place-based funders.**
6. **Support and inform philanthropic efforts to build a stronger learning and action network among national funders.**
7. **SFRA Phase II**
   1. Building the myriad of actors within the RECD space into a more coherent 'field'
   2. Growing the capacity of the field to engage in and effect systems change



Who is SFRA?

Steering Committee

- **Farah Ahmad** & **Ed Sivak,** Partners for Rural Transformation
- **Brandy Bynum Dawson,** MDC
- **Allison Dembeck**, Save the Children
- **Jeff Hough**, Bannock County, Idaho
- **Ann Lichter,** Resource Rural
- **David Lipsetz**, Housing Assistance Council
- **Doug O'Brien**, U.S. Co-ops
- **Tony Pipa**, Brookings Institution

Financial Support

This project was made possible with generous support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and CoBank.

Contributors

Mike Amato, Amato Advisors
Katrina Badger, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Marie Barry, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative
[Heidi Binko, Just Transition Fund]
Kelliann Blazek, International Economic Development Council
Charlie Brown, Trust for Civic Life
Nils Christoffersen, Wallowa Resources
Brandon Dennison, Marshall University, Coalfield Development
Ryan Eller, Appalachian Funders Network
Dawn Espe, The Sowing Room
Devin Foote, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Dreama Gentry, Partners for Rural Impact
Sarah Griffen, Griffen Consulting
Dell Gines, Confluo Global
Michelle Gladstone-Wade, Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians Economic Development Corporation
Leslie Hagele, CoBank
Julia Haggerty, Montana State University, RCRC Group
Chris Harris, Hunger Free Kansas
Anne Hazlett, Purdue University
Jason Henderson, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach
Benya Kraus, Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation
Jerry Kenney, Dogwood Health Trust
Ashly Ligouri, CoBank
Morgan Lommele, City Thread
Deb Love, Western Organizations of Resource Councils
Tito Llantada, Trust for Civic Life
Felicia Lucky, Heron Foundation
David Martinez, AZ Impact for Good
Shawn Milne, Bear River Association of Governments, Regional Economic Development Coalition
Karama Neal, Neal Firm
Zach Neumann, Colorado Economic Defense Project
Jonathan Njus, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Tuleah Palmer, Blandin Foundation
Alana Peterson, SpruceRoot
Ines Polonius, Communities Unlimited
Tara Risewick, Network Kansas, e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystem
Bonita Robertson-Hardy, Aspen Community Strategies Group
Paula Sammons, W.K. Kellogg Foundation
Chris Salyers, National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health
Ed Sivak, HOPE Enterprises
Sara Jane Smallwood-Cocke, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
Chris Spencer, Black Belt Community Foundation
Linh Tran, Heartland Fund
Amanda Weinstein, Center on Rural Innovation (CORI)

Project Staff

Katharine Ferguson, KWF Strategies
Mark Haggerty, RCRC Group
Cristine Nardi, U.S. Co-ops
Bernardo Penaherrera, U.S. Co-ops

NEXT STEPS



Share the SFRA Report

- Share the Strong Foundations for Rural Advancement report with people and organizations central to the work of building “rural community economic development” into a field and potentially interested in systems change efforts.

Expand the Circle

- Bring more interested parties into this systems-change conversation and determine how those involved want to participate going forward.

Prioritize & Act

- Establish funding, leadership, and working groups to begin Phase II of the project, advancing priority SFRA-identified recommendations.

How to Get Involved

Email us:

mark@rcrcgroup.org

Katharine.Ferguson@pm.me

CNardi@us.coop

- Request a copy of the SFRA report.
- Recommend someone who may be interested in this project.
- Share your interest in being involved in work related to a specific component of systems change or a specific SFRA-recommended project.




THANK YOU!