

The Foundation Review

Volume 15 | Issue 2

6-2023

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Recommended Citation

Kubisch, A. C., Allen, K., & Gimbel, M. (2023). Community Building as a Philosophy, Not an Initiative. *The Foundation Review*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1653>

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Community Building as a Philosophy, Not an Initiative

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Keywords: *Oregon, rural, community building, capacity, place-based, disaster*

Introduction

The field of philanthropy has long recognized the importance of community capacity building as a critical component of any strategy to improve well-being and life outcomes for under-resourced children and families. For the most part, that work has taken the form of “initiatives,” launched primarily by foundations in a limited number of places for specific periods of time and with predetermined investment levels and multiple roles for intermediaries, technical assistance providers, and evaluators. In a 2010 state-of-the-field review that examined 48 comprehensive community initiatives, the Aspen Roundtable on Community Change confirmed that there is widespread agreement that community capacity building should continue to be a core principle guiding place-based philanthropic investments, but that funder-driven initiatives are a flawed way to operationalize it (Kubisch et al., 2010).

The Ford Family Foundation is headquartered in Roseburg, Oregon, a town central to the state’s timber industry. Our work aims to ensure that children in rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, California, have the family, educational, and community supports they need to succeed in life. Like many foundations, we have significant grantmaking and scholarship programs. Unlike most foundations, we also have an entire department devoted to community building.

The initial work of that department was an initiative of sorts called the Ford Institute Leadership Program. From 2002–2016 the foundation sponsored a successful leadership program, with three key partners, that trained 6,000 leaders throughout our service area. The underlying theory was that capable leaders, working with effective organizations and strong

Key Points

- What happens when a foundation invests in community building for the long haul? The Ford Family Foundation, a rural embedded funder in southern Oregon, has made that transition over the past decade. The result is a transformed organization with a 10-year strategic plan focused on helping rural communities build the futures that they want to see — places where children and families can thrive.
- The foundation is pursuing community building not as a stand-alone strategy or “initiative,” but as a philosophy that guides local community development efforts based on capacity building and grantmaking based on partnerships. The shift to a community-based approach allows it to engage with rural communities on a nearly issue-agnostic basis and support them in developing the “Four Cs”: connections, capacity, community-led action, and a culture of community building.
- The approach is represented by the bilingual Community Building Approach Wheel, a framework and language created by convening a cross-section of rural leaders as working teams to describe community-building principles and practices. The foundation developed partnerships with several communities to describe their community-building work, and the wheel, now owned by dozens of communities, is not static: It continues to evolve as the work evolves, as new communities join, and as the foundation and its partners learn and change.
- This article shares learnings from The Ford Family Foundation’s experience of becoming a community-building organization and the difference it has made. It also discusses some of the pitfalls it has encountered along the way and how the foundation has responded to them. To be clear: This work is not done; it is ongoing. There is much more to do and much more to learn.

Our most significant structural staffing change came when we created the field coordinator position. Field coordinators work in their home communities and regions, where they have lived experience.

collaboratives, would leverage one another and lead to an improved community. This turned out to be true in some instances, and there are many civic and community leaders in the region who trace their inspiration, confidence, and skills to the leadership classes they attended. Nevertheless, training alone did not lead to the kind of wholesale community-driven improvement efforts the foundation had hoped to seed.

In 2014, the foundation reflected on being 12 years and \$25 million into an anticipated 10-year effort. We knew having strong relationships with thousands of local leaders was an invaluable asset, and that resident leaders were hungry to use their newly honed leadership skills and connections to tackle some of their community's most pressing challenges. So began the transition from leadership development to community development.

Now, a decade later, we are pursuing community building not as a stand-alone strategy or "initiative," but as a philosophy that underlies all our work (Brown, 2012; Easterling & Milleon, 2015). It guides our local community development efforts based on capacity building, our grantmaking based on partnerships, and our scholarship programs based on personal connections between our staff and 1,000 current scholarship recipients that are critical to our 93% college graduation rate.

In this article, we share learnings from our experience of becoming a community-building

organization and the difference it has made. We also share some of the pitfalls we have encountered along the way and how we have responded to them. To be clear: This work is not done; it is ongoing. We have much more to do and much more to learn.

Part One: What Does the Community-Building Approach Look Like?

Community-building work allows us to engage with rural communities on a nearly issue-agnostic basis and support communities to develop what we call the "Four Cs": connections, capacity, community-led action, and a culture of community building.

Our community-building approach is represented by the bilingual Community Building Approach (CBA) Wheel. (See Figure 1.) We convened a cross-section of rural leaders in working teams to create the framework and language to describe community-building principles and practices, and we developed partnerships with several communities to describe their community-building work (Pattison, 2018). The resulting CBA Wheel has been used, adapted, and improved over time, and is now owned by dozens of communities and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of community builders. It is not static: It continues to evolve as the work evolves, as new communities join, and as we and our partners learn and change.

The CBA Wheel has also become the tool around which our entire organization orients itself, affecting everything from how we think about grantmaking to how departments integrate strategies to achieve shared outcomes.

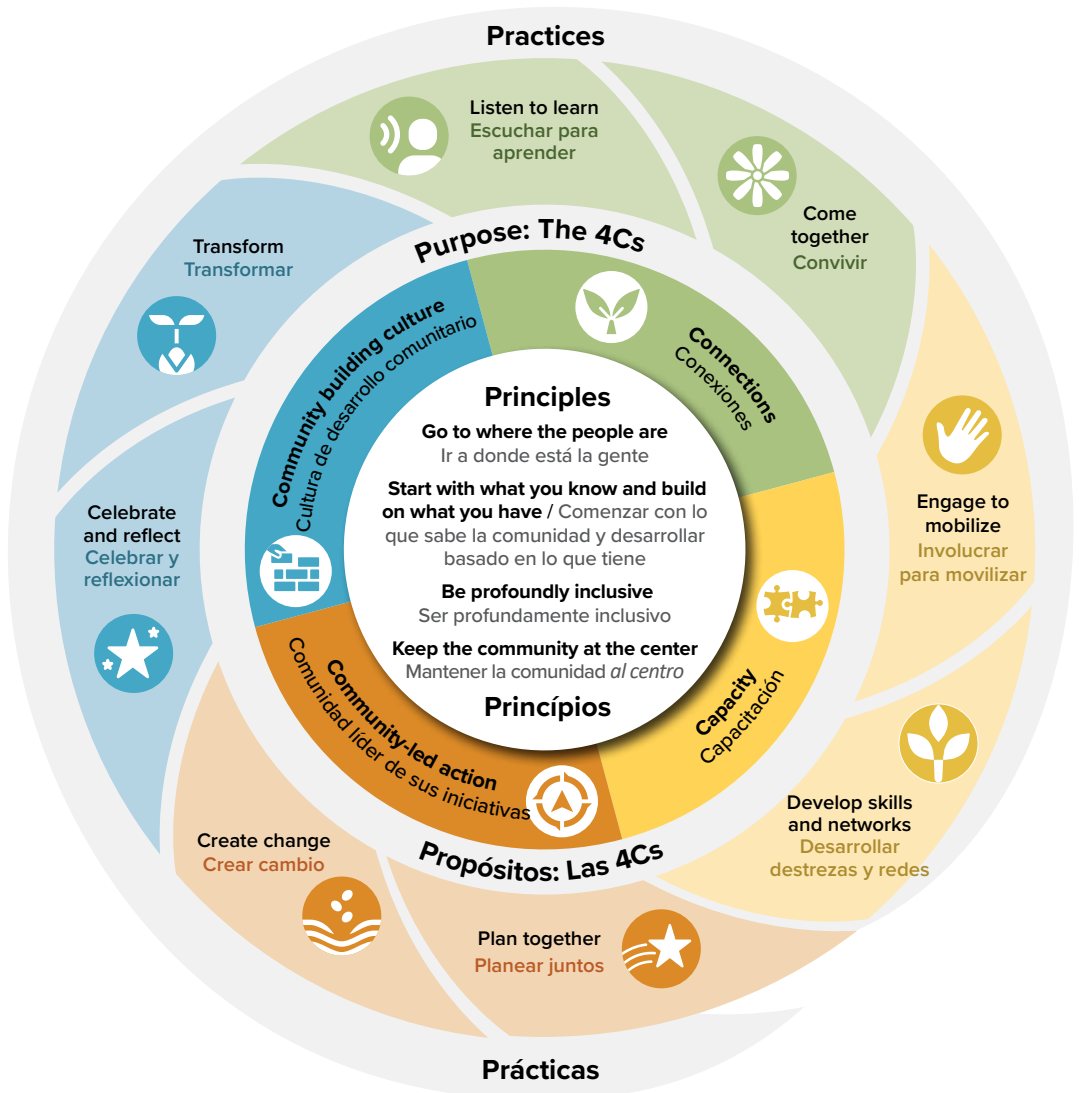
Implementing CBA has required more and different kinds of staff. Our most significant structural staffing change came when we created the field coordinator position. Field coordinators work in their home communities and regions, where they have lived experience. They help rural residents recognize possibilities and build skills to lead their community's visioning efforts. Field coordinators support community listening, convening, planning, celebration, reflection, and much more. They never enter with a specific

FIGURE 1 The CBA Wheel



Rural Community Building Approach

Enfoque en Desarrollo Comunitario Rural



agenda in mind; rather, they seek community energy wherever it lies and build on it. Field coordinators prioritize building trusted relationships with community members to support long-term, sustainable community improvement. They help connect residents to potential resources from The Ford Family Foundation as well as other funders. At present, we have seven field coordinators; three are charged with connecting to Latinx and Native American communities in addition to covering a specific geography. An evaluation¹ confirmed the unique contribution of the field coordinator strategy and suggested areas for continued improvement that focused on foundation transparency around the location and authority of field coordinators and related power dynamics, and support for field coordinators to address social division and the needs of culturally specific groups.

Do we have solid proof that this way of working has greater impact than more traditional philanthropic approaches? It's beginning to emerge. For now, we have ample evidence to affirm that CBA is the right approach for us, for our communities, and for our rural region. As a dedicated learning organization, we work continuously to take stock of lessons and distill the factors that contribute to our effectiveness. We are committed to tending to them, nurturing them, and growing them over time. We also aim to identify the barriers that hinder our progress and the mistakes we make along the way so that we can learn from them as well.

Part Two: What Difference Has It Made?

In this section, we share some wins for individuals, organizations, communities, and our own organization over the last 10 years, born out of our growing commitment to community building as a philosophy rather than an initiative or a stand-alone program.

First, individuals see themselves as change agents. We like to say that everyone is a community builder. An evaluation of our

community-building work (The Ford Family Foundation, 2019) indicated that the CBA is increasing the number and scope of relationships among community members: Rural residents noted “people starting to believe that things can be different” (p. 3) and expressed appreciation for “unexpected people working together” (p. 9) from different sectors. A later evaluation survey showed that three out of four respondents report “exchanging ideas across groups of people with different perspectives, backgrounds and beliefs,” that people are increasingly and more strongly identifying with the term “community builder,” and that people are “turning community planning into action” (Public Profit, 2022). Most also reported using the CBA Wheel and language in their local work.

Second, organizations are creating partnerships for community improvement. Community-building practices encourage organizations to function better internally and to partner proactively with the goal of promoting the common good. To cultivate community-building capacity, our foundation has developed partnerships with about a dozen local, regional, and statewide groups that range from the state association of nonprofits to local social services organizations. One is a 20-year-old organization in Burns, Oregon, called the High Desert Partnership, which serves as a powerful example of how a backbone organization in a rural community can foster collaboration under the most challenging circumstances. In this case, the early work the organization had done to overcome historical distrust between private landowners and public agency land managers was key to bringing the community together to oppose occupation of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge by anti-government activists (Allen et al., 2019). Our foundation has supported the partnership in expanding its work and applying this community-building approach to other community priorities.

¹ See Ford Family Foundation. (2023). *How philanthropy can “go to where the people are”: Lessons learned through building community with field coordinators*. <https://www.tfff.org/wp-content/uploads/HowPhilanthropyCanGoToWhereThePeopleAre-May2023.pdf>

Third, rural communities are envisioning the futures they want to see for themselves, improving local conditions, and cultivating resilience in the process. At this time, we are working deeply with 15 communities as they articulate their future story, define a 10-year or even 20-year vision, develop plans to get them there, lay out implementation strategies, bring people together to carry them out, and work through the inevitable ups, downs, and sideways along the way. To paraphrase Ollivander in the “Harry Potter” series: The foundation does not choose the communities, they choose community building. The work starts small — a conversation, an email, a meal, a community celebration — and grows over time. The process looks different for each community. It is not quick work.

Fourth, disasters are the ultimate test. While we have engaged in this transition to community building, our foundation has been called to respond to a mass shooting on our local community college campus, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the worst wildfire season in Oregon’s history. We learned that local community strength going into a traumatic event served as a primary predictor of success coming out of it. A study and video documented how places that had been following the CBA were much better prepared for the pandemic because their communities

- had strong connections and trust with a wide range of people,
- had capacity to convene the community for planning and to engage external partners,

On the Ground: Three Community Success Stories

From Relationship-Building to Comprehensive Community Development

In remote Happy Camp, California, one of our field coordinators engaged deeply with a local effort to grow a network of relationships that eventually garnered support from every department at The Ford Family Foundation, along with multiple outside funders. Camping on the river with members of the Karuk Tribe, holding community breakfasts, and hosting weekly Zoom meetings have all resulted in greater trust and shared vision. Small grants for projects like a playground, a farmers market, and community conversations have enabled the foundation to provide hope-building launch pads for great ambitions. These have led to a child care center, a summer camp, a volunteer-driven home-rebuilding program, a new health center, a tribal fire-resiliency program, and rehabilitation of the community center. Relationships cultivated and nurtured during “blue sky” days made it possible for community builders to call upon their network to organize a response and recovery effort during COVID-19 and when the devastating 2020 Slater Fire hit the town.

Mobilizing to Aid Crews Fighting Weeks-Long Wildfire

In Glide, Oregon, the foundation had supported a group called Glide Revitalization since 2017. The group was able to mobilize quickly when the Archie Creek wildfire raced down the North Umpqua River Valley. Glide Revitalization assisted, fed, and otherwise supported firefighters for weeks. They also organized volunteer response, including Red Cross and federal emergency management activities, on behalf of the entire community. Without their history of community building, it is unlikely that this small, unincorporated community would have been able to respond with such speed and clarity.

Early Investment Paves Access to Federal Development Grant

The Ford Family Foundation was an early investor in A Greater Applegate, a nascent community-building organization in the Applegate Valley region of southern Oregon. The investment went beyond funding to include technical assistance, peer learning, celebration swag for rural community builders, and more. That early collaboration led to improved capacity, self-belief, ability to build early wins, and ambition to attract other public and private resources. The group received one of only 14 place-making site grants awarded nationally by USDA Rural Development, a federal program aimed at creating jobs and upgrading infrastructure in rural communities. In 2023, A Greater Applegate was one of 17 sites selected nationally by the National Endowment for the Arts to take part in the Citizens’ Institute on Rural Design.

- could mobilize community-led action quickly, and
- had built and maintained a culture of care and commitment in the face of a disaster (The Ford Family Foundation, 2020).

In September 2020, amid the COVID-19 crisis, explosive wildfires broke out in multiple places across Oregon. One horrific night would result in nearly one million acres burned, with thousands of homes lost and families displaced. Because of our investments in community building and field staff in place, The Ford Family Foundation found itself in an unexpectedly advantageous position to take immediate action in the affected communities.

And, finally, community-building demonstrates community capacity that attracts investment. A research project on how community building leverages outside funding showed that the foundation's 2019 expenditure of \$306,635 (excluding staff time) in three communities yielded a return of more than \$15 million invested in those communities (The Ford Family Foundation, 2021). In implementing CBA, we find we are often the very first dollars in, walking alongside the community as they develop the connections and capacity to attract other sources of funding.

Other regional community-building efforts in which we invested early have similar stories to share. Organizers in the lower Siuslaw Valley successfully advocated for better bus service between the community and a regional urban center 60 miles away. In the Illinois Valley, implementing the CBA in an area with a long anti-tax history led to a public education and mobilization campaign that helped pass the first public safety bond measure in decades, providing more than \$37 million over a five-year period. And the list goes on.

Part Three: Key Lessons About Implementing a Community-Building Approach

When a foundation turns from implementing a program to helping people see the possibilities

for building their own futures, many things begin to shift. Our two-year strategic planning process in 2020–2022 made clear how CBA had given us vocabulary to express our ways of working, especially across departments. Increasingly, our staff were referring to themselves as community builders — in the communities where they live, but also within our own organization. Our board of directors has joined in the transformation. Below are some key lessons from our journey.

Build on Your Comparative Advantage

Three factors have facilitated our ability to commit to and broadly integrate community building throughout our organization.

1. We work in small towns (35,000 or fewer residents) in rural Oregon and Northern California, a sparsely populated region. Geographic boundaries define communities quite clearly, reducing the struggles associated with defining “community” that our urban counterparts face (with the important exception of unincorporated places). Communities often have a strong identity, even when the community is defined as a county. For example, Harney County, the county largest in land mass (almost twice the size of Connecticut), has a population of only 7,500 — yet its culture has become so collaborative that it has gotten a nickname: The Harney Way.
2. The Ford Family Foundation was established to exist in perpetuity. We are committed to our place, and we are not going away. If community work gets a bit off track or loses energy for a while, we can wait it out or support efforts to work it out rather than abandoning it.
3. We are truly embedded in our rural region. Our headquarters is in a small town where our founders' wealth was earned. Most foundation staff live, work, attend schools and churches, volunteer, shop, and play in the same communities we serve.

Bake It Into Your Culture

Our organization's original core values include respect, integrity, and community. Through an organizationwide process in 2017 called The Culture Project, we articulated how we live out these values, how we show up in communities, and how we interact with partners, grantees, and scholarship recipients. The emphasis is on openness, listening, and being helpful in any way we can. We always say that "we want to get to yes." The vocabulary we use and our public messaging always emphasize following the lead and wisdom of communities. As one of our board members stated during our strategic planning process, "CBA is in our DNA."

This cultural shift is also apparent in the evolution of our community-building department. Launched in 2000, it was then called the Ford Institute for Community Building. The name implied that it was separate from the foundation, a stand-alone venture that could possibly even spin off into its own independent 501(c)(3). In 2013 we intentionally reversed that drift, emphasizing that community building should be woven into everything we do. As part of our strategic planning, the word "Institute" was dropped from its name and it was rebranded as the Rural Community Building department.

Invest in New Staff With Different Skills

In the early 2000s, The Ford Family Foundation was largely a responsive grantmaking foundation, outsourcing our leadership development and scholarship programs. Until 2013, we only had only three program officers. Today we have 23 program staff, all of whom have wide-ranging and nontraditional responsibilities. Thirteen are program officers and directors with expertise in the areas in which they work, such as early child development, education, and economic development. Far more than grantmakers, they are convenors, technical assistance providers, advocates, champions of the work, field builders, and systems-change agents. Seven are field coordinators. We also have three learning staff dedicated to leveraging the foundation's research, policy, and communications opportunities.

Community building must start where there is community energy, and not where a foundation's publicized priorities lie. Community building must also start whenever the community is ready, not when philanthropy is ready.

Honor the Pace and Complexity of a Community's Journey

Community building must start where there is community energy, and not where a foundation's publicized priorities lie. Community building must also start whenever the community is ready, not when philanthropy is ready. These are two very challenging practices for foundations to embrace. In our experience, every community is ready for something. We just have to listen for it and draw out community wisdom.

We also know that maintaining comfort with complexity is an absolute must. Any community priority can be an entry point into a comprehensive approach to building the community's future. Each win helps energize new work, but one dimension of complexity is appreciating that change is not linear or even constantly positive. Instead, it is fitful.

Work to Align Board, Staff, and Institutional Processes

As our work matured and our endowment grew (current payout is \$55 million), the role of our board of directors changed. Ten years ago, the board approved every grant over \$10,000. Realizing they needed to "get out of the weeds," board members now approve overall strategies and resource allocations at a high level and have turned over day-to-day decisions to staff. Staff can work in partnership with grantees and communities to determine what kind of support is

needed at any particular moment and know they have the authority to follow through. This is key to building trust and relationships.

While our board intuitively appreciates that community building is critical to making change in rural communities, its members are naturally oriented toward population level-outcomes. Some members once expressed skepticism that community building is “all about process” and “soft outcomes.” Board engagement and visits with community builders help them see, hear, and feel the reality of what is happening in communities. This is hard to schedule, but the impact over time is powerful. As one board member reported, “I used to be a community-building skeptic, and now I’m a community-building zealot.”

Double Down on Data and Learning

We have had to figure out what it means to be a “learning organization,” and our commitment to the practice has been transformative. In 2016, we hired our first-ever director for learning and knowledge management, and we now have a department of four staff who work on evaluation, learning, policy research, and communications. They undertake specialized research and evaluation projects, oversee a bench of external evaluators who can be tapped for projects, and communicate our findings using compelling data visualization, video, and social media. They also lead internal staff and board learning processes.

Our commitment to community building has necessitated the delegation of authority from board to staff and a new strategic plan, and those in turn have required different kinds of staff reporting and board oversight procedures. Quarterly snapshots report on the implementation wins and challenges of each of the 10 strategic priorities, and an annual progress tracker reports on changes in community-level outcomes.

Information about local communities is a powerful community-building tool. We invest

in new data collection, analysis, and publications about rural communities that include an annual “Oregon by the Numbers”² community indicators report and a first-of-its-kind Oregon Voices survey project. Both provide robust, county-level data and windows into the lived experiences of residents across the state. We are also increasingly using our expertise and position in the state landscape to elevate and champion rural issues, places, and people to statewide actors and decision-makers.

Part Four: Problems and Challenges

Lest our journey comes across as obstacle-free, we share here some problems and challenges we are encountering along the way. It is important to note that these are not so much one-time solvable problems as they are ongoing tensions that will require regular attention for any community-building organization. Some are within our locus of control, so we have been able to make changes and try new approaches based on experience. Others relate more to how the work is unfolding in communities and interacting with broader systems, where we have less influence. Such challenges are ever-present in one form or another and we try to name them, learn about them, and then adapt as they influence our work. We have made and will continue to make our share of mistakes along the way.

Scale: How Much Geography Can We Really Cover?

Community building is, by definition, a retail approach to generating change. It relies on genuine, deep, and trusting relationships on which collaborative work can be built. The Ford Family Foundation covers rural Oregon and Northern California, and even though we have a connection in virtually every one of the nearly 250 small towns in this vast region, we simply cannot have the depth of relationships that is required in each. We created the out-stationed field coordinator position, hired from the communities where they live, to have direct connections in many places. We have tried to define somewhat manageable geographic boundaries

² See <https://www.tfff.org/oregon-numbers/>

for each, but uneven population distribution means some drive very long distances. Field coordinators help but do not solve the problem.

As a result, we will limit the number of communities where we will have deep relationships and comprehensive investments over the next decade. We estimate that within 10 years a combination of staff connections, partnerships, and intermediary organizations will allow us to work intensively and directly in about 50 communities and in about another 100 communities at a lower level of engagement. We will track impact according to the maturity of the community-building effort and our level of engagement.

Scope: How Issue-Agnostic Can We Really Be?

A purist approach to community building would suggest that a foundation would be agnostic about the issues that communities choose as their focus. In fact, our foundation's strategic plan prioritizes the well-being of children, youth, and families, and, within that broad scope, we have made decisions about "what's in" and "what's out." For example, we do not fund housing programs, even though housing availability and affordability are critical challenges throughout our rural communities and, of course, a requirement for family stability. Also, although we are a rural foundation, we do not focus on natural resources. So, what would we do if the issue that sparked community-building momentum was about housing or the natural environment? We push ourselves to be constantly aware of this power dynamic where the foundation ultimately holds the cards about such decisions and look for other ways to support those communities' visions.

For example, this concern caused us to rethink our "open door" responsive grantmaking. Even as we have moved to become a more strategic philanthropy, we have committed to maintaining a floor of 10% of our payout to responsive grantmaking. As a way to live out our community-building philosophy of meeting communities where they are, we decided to widen the scope of our Good Neighbor responsive grants (below \$25,000) to almost any issue. This gives us a way

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to be responsive to community priorities, even if they are unlikely to grow into larger strategic grantmaking investments. In addition, the Good Neighbor grants allow us to learn more and potentially help the grantee to connect to other funding opportunities.

Evaluation: A Must, but How to Best Support and Rightsize It?

As we shifted our strategy toward the CBA, we were committed to thoughtfully tracking this work. We had two goals: to create evaluation instruments and processes that would help implementation and be educative experiences for everyone involved — our board, staff, and community-building partners; and to gather and assess evidence about the link between the process of community building and its impact in order to contribute our own work as well as the field's knowledge base.

Belief in the value of this approach would not be enough. We were hyperaware that we would need to go beyond storytelling and process evaluation to be able to make summative statements about "hard" outcomes. We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to do this and, as a result, made the mistake of putting into place too many evaluation elements too soon, many of which were quite burdensome to community partners. For example, we worked with an evaluator to have leaders in two of our early CBA communities conduct 40 in-depth interviews with key local partners. This produced rich information — a dense, 39-page report — but the volume of work was mismatched to the community process and stage of work.

Do some communities lose momentum and energy? For sure. In our history, we have encountered times when work could lay dormant for a while until a new spark appears. We have learned that “active waiting” is a key principle of community building.

Along the way, we have learned how hard it is to create instruments to evaluate community building in an objective and rigorous way. On one hand, it is difficult for people to self-assess work they are close to and/or investing in personally. We have tried many technical evaluation strategies — such as training community members around inter-rater reliability and triangulation across community self-assessments — but such calibration is time consuming and cannot practically be part of every evaluation exercise. On the other hand, it is difficult for external evaluators to understand what they’re evaluating without building relationships with communities and staff to learn about the complexity and context of the work. That, too, always takes more time than expected.

We also continue to be challenged by how hard it is to create tools that reflect the ebb and flow of community building. We developed a community-building growth matrix with six stages — from “emerging” to “transformational” — with a vision of tracking communities as they matured. However, such tools generally suggest the work is more linear than it actually is and that a community is a singular entity.

At present, we take a multipronged approach to evaluation. An external evaluator conducts an annual survey of community members to elicit residents’ views and harvest outcomes related to changes in the Four Cs (connections, capacity,

community-led action, and culture). Our longest community-building partners also act as evaluation innovators, engaging in comprehensive annual reflection exercises aligned with the intricacies of the Four Cs. We are developing methods for more regularly tracking funds leveraged through our community-building investments. Finally, staff need to be supported in finding ways to embed evaluative thinking in their daily practice so that learning can happen in real time. Making this a foundationwide practice is much easier to say than it is to do, however, and we are still finding our way.

Momentum and Funding: How Do We Sustain It?

Many types of events have set things back in communities, from burnout and changes in leadership to natural disasters, human tragedies, and economic recession. As a foundation established in perpetuity, we have been able to be realistic about the inevitability of threats and help communities manage through them and recalibrate. Do some communities lose momentum and energy? For sure. In our history, we have encountered times when work could lay dormant for a while until a new spark appears. We have learned that “active waiting” is a key principle of community building.

We have also been challenged by our goal of attracting new funding for community building. The community-building backbone role is notoriously difficult to fund and will likely always fall to philanthropy. We hope that by being one of the early funders of this work, we can help leverage additional resources. Our longer-term goal is to demonstrate the value of community building so other funders will join, but at this point we do not know how realistic that goal is.

The Larger Context: Can Community Building Overcome Political and Ideological Divisions?

Recent years have surfaced a new challenge for our community-building work, especially in rural communities: political polarization. All of the community building in the world does not inoculate a community from the broader

tensions surfacing across our nation. In our region we have witnessed the negative fallout from these ideological divisions: a gay pride celebration that led to a confrontational counterprotest by a fundamentalist religious group; the closure of a child care center serving 100 children because leaders felt their rights were abrogated by the governor's COVID-19 masking mandate; an executive from a peer foundation declining to appear on a panel celebrating a local leader who had led her community's wildfire response because that person had traveled to the White House lawn on January 6, 2021, to protest the outcome of the presidential election; a community builder of color who began to feel so unsafe that she quietly moved away.

There is no doubt that this extreme polarization makes the work of bringing disparate groups together in common cause more difficult. We support community building as a positive and forward-looking enterprise. In these divided times, we believe we also have an obligation to help community builders develop skills to mediate conflict and communicate across differences.

And diversity can strengthen a community's response to catastrophe. In a rural community devastated by the 2020 wildfires, a diverse team trauma-bonded as they worked together to respond to the community's urgent and complex need. They love to tell their story as a running joke: "A trans chick, a Trump supporter, a pastor, and a Black guy walk into a bar, and what happens? Well, they make a plan to save a town."

Part Five: The Road Ahead

We ask ourselves continuously, what are we hearing from communities? What do the data tell us? How has the landscape shifted? Where is this work headed? Where does it need to go? Who else needs to be part of the conversation? We know the number one thing we need to do is to keep listening, learning, and holding the community at the center of the work.

We have no crystal ball, but below are some ideas about what we anticipate on the road ahead, both internally for our organization and

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externally for communities and the larger field of community building.

- **Prioritize profound inclusivity.** We need to urge communities and push ourselves to always expand our circles of inclusion, engaging those traditionally excluded from power and decision-making. This means delivering on our commitment to engaging rural people of color and LGBTQ+ residents. This need has been underscored by communities in every evaluation project we have conducted, so we are offering resources for our mostly white, but diversifying, rural communities and building our staff capacity as well. Our approach has been simply to always ask ourselves and our partner communities: "Who's not here?" — and then develop creative and respectful ways to reach youth, low-income households, geographically distant and isolated populations, and rural communities of color. There is no single solution to this challenge — it needs to be an ever-present priority and a constant work in progress. But when it works, it's awesome!
- **Weave and layer.** Our strategic plan has 10 priorities designed to work synergistically to support comprehensive well-being for children, families, and communities. Our community-building partner sites, equipped with the Four Cs, are in various stages of readiness for more intensive and multipronged

While the bulk of our attention is at the local and regional levels, we are increasingly tackling challenges at the systems level that could make structural changes to benefit rural people and places.

program strategies such as early child development, education, and economic development. Taking a comprehensive approach to these challenges allows us to start wherever the community is focused (because any entry point can lead to a comprehensive response) and honors the interconnected nature of issues and the complexity of the work.

- **Invest in improving data and engaging the wider field.** We are accumulating evidence that CBA helps catalyze the positive impacts that our organization and rural communities seek. However, measurement in this field remains young and part of our work ahead is to get better at systematic data collection processes and analyses that will inform and improve this work. We are committed to ensuring that the rigor of the science of community building matches the beauty of the art of community building. We also intend to collaborate with others to develop new tools, share promising practices, and grow the larger field.
- **Energize a community-building movement.** Ultimately, the impact of our work will depend on our ability to enhance

opportunities for rural communities to better network and align to build collective power. While the bulk of our attention is at the local and regional levels, we are increasingly tackling challenges at the systems level that could make structural changes to benefit rural people and places. This could take place by geography and/or by issue area (notably, broadband and housing). We dream of an ongoing community-building movement where the voices of local residents, communities, and organizations are consistently guiding system-level decisions — where putting community first, honoring local wisdom, staying adaptive, insisting on inclusivity, weaving across silos, and regularly celebrating wins is the normal way of doing community development.

Conclusion

The Ford Family Foundation is committed to walking with rural communities in our region as a partner through the inevitable ups and downs we all will go through. This is the unique power and privilege of a foundation that is place-based and has a mandate of perpetuity, but our community-building philosophy — and, especially, how we operationalize it — suggests lessons for all philanthropic endeavors.

Although we are a decade into this work, we feel we are still in the early stages. We are at peace with the fact that it has no end point. It is constantly unfolding and evolving. That is why we are always in learning mode. What will it look like in another decade? We believe that the successes that we're seeing today will turn into transformative wins in the future. We also know that some of the persistent challenges we describe here will still be around — we just hope to keep getting better at managing them. Please reach out to us and share what you are learning.

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