The "TRIC" to Fostering Shared Economic Prosperity in Rural America

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Introduction

When people think of "rural America," different images may come to mind. One person may envision a pastoral scene of rolling farmland, another may recall a lolling pump jack on a desolate plain. Others may picture the beauty and majesty of the wilderness, while their neighbors might think about a train hauling coal down a railroad in a small town. When asked to think about the people living there, some may envision a Hispanic banker or a Native American lawyer, others a Black teacher or a white nurse. The truth is all these people would be right, for rural America has always been many things.

Much of the narrative about rural America in recent years has focused on its challenges. We often hear of the places seemingly left behind by the economy of today and tomorrow. However, the nearly infinite variety of people and places across rural America means rural communities exist across the spectrum: from places that are experiencing their heyday to places that can't seem to catch a break. Even within individual rural communities—whether they are thriving or barely surviving—there are people who are doing well and people who find it difficult to make ends meet.

Whether it is at its peak, its rock bottom or somewhere in between, every rural community has something that makes it special. Perhaps it is the local workforce. Perhaps it is the beauty of the landscape. Perhaps it is rich soil. Perhaps it is the strong social fabric of the community. Whatever it is, these assets represent the community's best chance to move forward.

And yet, far too often, communities look beyond their own boundaries for solutions that will either jolt them back to life or return them to a prior era. Communities may wish they had what another community has, instead of recognizing what they already have. Or, they may spend too much of their time focused on attracting firms from elsewhere, instead of learning about and investing in the needs of the existing—or potential—businesses in their own backyards. Their aims are often well-intentioned. Like leaders in most places, rural leaders want to ensure their community is an attractive place to live so people will want to continue to live and work there. They want to collect sufficient tax revenue to maintain high-quality public services, such as good schools, smooth roads and functioning water systems. They want sufficient, good-quality jobs in their community so the people living there can afford a comfortable life. These are all laudable goals for any community to have, and appropriate goals for rural development efforts.

We believe rural communities are more likely to achieve these and other common community and economic development goals if, instead of focusing on scarcity or on only what they need to bring in from the outside, they build from the inside on the assets they already have. We also believe that rural communities will achieve longer-term, more durable success if they focus not just on the aggregate picture, but on how their development efforts reflect and consider the needs and opportunities of all segments of the community.

Because of these beliefs, we think that an asset-based, equitable approach to rural development not only is necessary but will set communities on a course to create broad-based economic prosperity. Our proposed approach is **tailored** to the specific goals, assets and organizational infrastructure of the community; designed to be **resilient** to changing circumstances; intentionally **inclusive** about who is at the decision-making table and who benefits from local development; and created and carried out through a **collaborative** process. We call this type of approach the "TRIC" to fostering shared economic prosperity in rural communities.

The TRIC concept is heavily influenced by previous development frameworks, including the rural wealth creation approach,[1] the WealthWorks method[2] and the collective impact model.[3] We believe the TRIC framework builds on the ideas outlined in these different existing development approaches by bringing important concepts from each into a comprehensive framework that places greater emphasis on each of the four principles than exists in any one current approach.

The TRIC framework for how to approach rural development is intentionally not sector- or policy area-specific. Whether the area of opportunity in your community is related to expanding the availability of affordable housing, bolstering quality jobs, supporting small-business development and entrepreneurship, increasing high-speed internet access, improving educational outcomes or fostering a vibrant arts culture, we believe that taking this kind of approach can make your efforts more impactful, more enduring and more equitable.

That is why we endeavored to create *Investing in Rural Prosperity* and to write this chapter: to help show that there is another way, and that some communities are producing incredible outcomes by taking an approach consistent with this framework. Many of these communities not only are having success overall but are creating opportunities for those who have historically faced the most challenges engaging within the economy. While we focus specifically on rural communities, we believe that this approach has applicability in urban or suburban contexts too.

The remainder of this chapter explores the four principles included in the framework—their meanings, their interconnectedness and interdependence, and their ability to inform and shape rural development. We have also included sets of example questions to help readers begin to consider how the four principles might inform their efforts to support rural communities.

Tailored: Making Certain the Strategy Fits the Place

Attempts to support shared economic prosperity in rural places will be most effective when they are tailored to the specific community where they are being carried out. This means that the strategy is fashioned around the goals of the community and the particular assets that are present in the community at the time it is being developed. Those assets could be particular skills that are present in the local workforce, local historical or cultural sites, proximity to a community college or university that is conducting research on a new technology, or any number of other things. Certainly, the assets always include the people inhabiting the community. It is important to identify who and what are already present in the community and to ensure the blueprint for development builds on their value. Of course, development activities can and should strive to create new or expand existing assets, but should be based on some asset already present in the community. Otherwise, they have little chance of being successful.

For example, if a rural community is in a region with abundant forests and a large number of highly skilled artisan woodworkers, then a development approach focused on marketing their products, building out the industry, or identifying and fostering complementary industries—such as cultural tourism, or bioenergy using wood industry waste products—might be a viable development opportunity. Or it might not, but at least it would have some reasonable basis for success.

It is also beneficial to take stock of the organizational capacity that exists in a community. Because every community has a different history, each has evolved with a unique set of institutions. As a result, the organizations that develop and implement a rural development strategy will likely be different in each community. It is critical to remember this in crafting policies and programs for rural communities, whether those are coming from the government, philanthropy, the private sector or elsewhere.

For example, some communities may be served by multiple strong community foundations, while others may not be served by any. In some communities, social services may be provided through a robust ecosystem of formally incorporated 501(c)(3) nonprofits, while in others these same services may be delivered by an informal network of volunteers. Some communities may have a strong local community bank with a full suite of services and products, others a community development financial institution loan fund with targeted resources for underserved parts of the community, and others may have a revolving loan fund at the local economic development agency. In each case, how you engage with your community needs to reflect the capacity that exists.

While the centrality of tailoring your rural development strategy may sound obvious, many communities do not currently take this approach, nor do many of the government agencies, foundations or other resource providers that want to support them. Oftentimes, well-meaning community leaders pursue opportunities that sound good but have little likelihood of success or, even if they do "succeed," provide little benefit to the community itself, because community members lack the specific skills or abilities necessary to participate and are not sufficiently supported to develop them. Similarly, many well-intentioned resource providers have a clearly defined box they want grantees to fit into that may not necessarily match the realities of the communities they want to help. Communities need to be met where they are, not presented with one-size-fits-all solutions.

Example questions to consider in developing a <u>tailored</u> development approach:

Community Members

- What assets does your community possess? How does your plan for advancing local economic prosperity build on those assets?
- Who in your community can help implement the strategies you have identified? How might you bolster your community's capacity to move your strategies forward?

Funders

- Do your priorities reflect the opportunities present in the community in which you are looking to make funds available?
- Are your funding criteria flexible enough to adapt to different local contexts, or could they create or contribute to historical and/or unintended barriers depending on the community's institutional infrastructure?

Policymakers

- Do your policies depend on the existence of specific institutions within target communities? If so, does the existence of those institutions differ across areas in a way that could create barriers to advancing shared economic prosperity?
- Are your policies flexible enough to be relevant regardless of a community's industrial or workforce composition, or will they be inaccessible to certain communities or drive them to pursue strategies that don't align with their current assets?

Resilient: Designing for Durable Adaptability

To have long-lasting, positive effects on the community, rural development efforts must be structured in a way that is resilient to both the sudden shocks and gradual changes that will undoubtedly occur over time. The kinds of changes that will inevitably buffet a rural community, potentially derailing its progress, are manifold. They could be climate-induced natural disasters, financial market disruptions, widespread or localized economic restructurings, pandemics, or any number of other unforeseen events. They could occur decades apart, or they could all happen in one year. When a community encounters changing dynamics, it needs to be able to respond and adapt throughout these shifts.

To the greatest extent possible, this need for resiliency should be built into the way communities plan for and structure their rural development activities. This means not being overly reliant on one person, one organization or one industry. It means considering, planning for and hedging against what happens if the big employer in town goes bust. It means having a plan in place for how to address the economic and financial needs of your local residents and businesses in the event a natural disaster affects their ability to earn income. It also means thinking about what happens if that one very active local community member wins the lottery and uproots his or her life.

To be resilient, rural development strategies also need to be future-oriented. Among other things, this involves performing a forward-looking assessment of trends in the economy and demography—locally, nationally and globally—and thinking about how best to position the community to benefit from what is on the horizon, and then mobilizing the community to seize that opportunity. Resiliency is definitely not fostered by trying to recreate the economy that sustained the community 20 or more years ago.

Resiliency is also not a stagnant plan that you created a few years back, sitting on a shelf until some grant requires you to do another one in five years. This is a critical point we want to reinforce: While much of the discussion in this section can sound like planning, resiliency is not just a planning process, and it is not a solitary activity. To truly weave resilience into the fabric of a community, it must be an ongoing process. It is a cycle that is in constant motion, evolving as the community evolves and as the external environment changes.

Because of this, resilience is not something that can be created with a one-time planning grant or a short-term training program focused on a singular technical topic. It requires building long-term capacity in the community among a wide network of organizations that work together and adapt over time. This argues for long-term, consistent funding and support that help build this muscle memory in the community.

It also dictates that ongoing evaluation—and investment into the necessary capacity to carry it out—is imperative. It is very difficult for local communities to effectively adapt over time if they cannot distinguish between what they are doing that is working and what they are doing that is not.

Example questions to consider in assessing whether your development approach is resilient:

Community Members

- Do you regularly update your development approach in response to changing dynamics, such as changes in the composition of your local workforce and the future prospects of key industries?
- Are your development initiatives led by one or two people or organizations? What would happen if one or both of them left the community? Who would take over their work?

Funders

- In what ways does your funding incentivize your grantees to adapt to changing circumstances? In what ways does your funding disincentivize them from adapting to those same circumstances?
- Do you help your grantees learn whether their efforts are achieving their intended objectives? How do you incorporate those lessons into future funding strategies?

Policymakers

- Do your policies encourage rural communities to invest in long-term, consistent capacity, or do they erect barriers to making long-term human capital investments?
- Do you regularly evaluate whether your policies or the programs you fund are having their intended effects? How does the knowledge created through those evaluations inform policy or program changes?

Inclusive: Engaging and Benefiting the Full Community

To truly advance shared economic prosperity in a rural place, development activities must be inclusive of the full range of people living in the community, especially those who traditionally may be on the sidelines. Taking an inclusive approach means more than just inviting a couple more diverse people into the existing process; it means rethinking your entire approach.

Inclusiveness often means reassessing who gets to decide what matters and what gets funding by ensuring that traditionally marginalized groups have a seat at the decision-making table, not only to have their voices heard but to actually exercise decision-making power. It may mean making greater investments into organizations led by people of color. It necessitates ascribing the same value to lived experience and insights that you afford to expertise developed in a classroom. It also requires putting front and center at all stages of the planning and implementation process the distributional effects of development choices on different groups—such as people of color, women, immigrants, and those with less-formal education or skills training—as well as how those choices correspond to the desires, needs and skills of those groups. In addition, success has to be measured, at least in part, by how well the plan improves the lives of representatives from these groups.

Those sitting on the sidelines of the community are often doing so because obstacles exist that limit their participation. Intentionality is required, therefore, to address the barriers they face and to open the door for new opportunities. For example, marginalized individuals may possess less accumulated wealth, be more likely to face transportation challenges, have difficulty paying for child care, require different types of skills training to access new job opportunities, or speak languages other than English. Each of the unique conditions applicable to these community members must be factored into the development strategy if it is to have any hope of creating economic opportunities that they can access and, thereby, creating long-term and durable economic prosperity for the community overall—as well as a place where everyone belongs.

To best understand the challenges individuals are experiencing, as well as the potential solutions to those challenges, it is important to view the community members most impacted by the challenges as experts of their own circumstances. Ask for their input, place value on their ideas and incorporate their feedback. Because community members coming from a variety of circumstances may have competing priorities that make it difficult to reach them, be flexible, and seek creative ways of hearing input. This may require changing when or where you hold meetings. It may necessitate providing child care during your meetings, or just being more understanding of people bringing their kids to meetings. It may also require going beyond simply holding a standard town hall or focus group.

Too often communities focus on attracting new members to their community and minimalizing those who already call it home. An inclusive approach recognizes the worth of existing community members, while making the community the kind of place that is likely to be welcoming to new populations. As a result, taking an inclusive approach can improve strategies aimed at both attracting new residents and retaining existing ones.

Ensuring that all community members benefit from the community's growth and prosperity will strengthen the fabric of the community itself and lead to a stronger economy overall. It may also result in other positive externalities including increased tax revenues, long-term cost savings and reduced population loss. As explored elsewhere in this book, racially and ethnically diverse populations—including immigrants—represent the largest source of population growth for many rural communities across the country. Therefore, if rural places want to thrive over the long term, they need to welcome and embrace people from diverse backgrounds and experiences, as well as open up leadership opportunities that deepen the commitment of diverse individuals to the community and make them want to stay and help it grow and thrive.

Example questions to consider in determining whether your development approach is inclusive:

Community Members

- Are any segments of your community missing from the decision-making table? Does everyone at the decision-making table have an equal voice in the ultimate decision?
- Is your plan for advancing shared local economic prosperity culturally relevant for your community's most vulnerable members, and does it explicitly focus on benefiting those members?

Funders

- How do the perspectives and voices of those often left on the sidelines shape your funding priorities and strategies?

- In deciding whom to fund, do you prioritize organizations led by people of color, immigrants, those with less-formal education, or other traditionally underserved groups? Do your outreach and marketing materials reach these populations, and are those materials in their primary languages?

Policymakers

- Do your policies or programs incentivize or require grantees to include marginalized groups at the decision-making table?
- Do any of your policies or programs create unintentional access barriers among certain population groups?

Collaborative: Advancing Further Together

Rural communities are more equipped to advance shared prosperity when people throughout the community, and across multiple communities, collaborate to formulate and implement development strategies. A prerequisite of collaboration is the recognition that collective action achieves greater impact than individual or siloed acts. In essence, we advance further together than we do alone.

Communities and their economies, even small rural ones, are incredibly complex systems. In most instances, it is largely infeasible for any one individual or organization to wield enough capacity and influence to shoulder long-term development responsibilities alone. Communities that achieve success over time pursue cross-sector approaches, whereby leaders from the nonprofit, for-profit, financial, government and philanthropic sectors work together. Each element of the community has something important to bring to the table. For example, an academic institution may bring research capacity, the private sector might offer market intelligence, a nonprofit may provide training or child care for the workforce, a community bank might provide access to credit to budding entrepreneurs, while the government and philanthropy may provide grants to bring it all together. By working together across silos, the community can accomplish goals no one segment can achieve by itself.

However, even if a rural community works well across sectors within its own borders, it may still struggle to marshal the resources needed to make the most of the opportunities available to it. This may be because it is too small to have everything it needs, because it has suffered from long-term disinvestment that has stripped it of key resources, or for various other reasons. This is when regional collaboration is necessary. Several communities within a region may not by themselves have everything they need to capitalize on a development opportunity, but together they may. For example, one community might have a workforce or business community with key specialized skills, a neighboring community may have a key piece of infrastructure, while yet another may have a market for a product or service that could be developed by collaborating with the workforce and infrastructure of the other two communities. Oftentimes, the assets of separate communities, when combined, are more than the sum of the individual parts.

The best collaborations seek to build consensus and also employ a distributed leadership approach. Collaborations are more durable when all involved feel their voices are heard, respected and given appropriate weight. If the leadership of the collaboration rests with more than one person, it is more likely to last even when there are changes in the leadership of one or more participating entities.

Shared prosperity within a community and across a region is unlikely to occur without collaboration. Identifying what everyone brings to the collective table, agreeing on common goals and pursuing a common vision will go a long way toward making collaboration a reality for your rural community.

Example questions to consider in structuring a collaborative development approach:

Community Members

- Who else in the community has a stake in the outcome of this activity? What benefits could each gain from working together?
- How does what you are doing relate to the opportunities and challenges facing other communities and organizations in your region? How could you achieve more if you worked on this together?

Funders

- Do you support the critical need for different groups to come together and coordinate their efforts? What must the communities you support do to do this hard work effectively?

- How does your funding approach incentivize long-term collaboration and consensus-building?

Policymakers

- Do your policies and programs incentivize competition between communities, or collaboration among them?
- Are you regularly showing up as a committed partner on equal footing to the others around the table?

The Relationships between the TRIC Principles

As you may have noticed, there is not a clear and clean distinction among these four principles. In fact, they are intimately interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

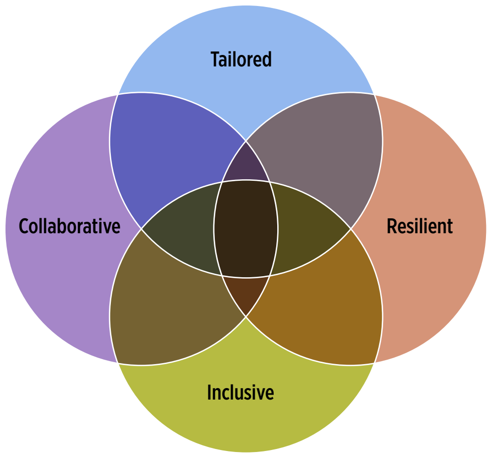
Tailored + Inclusive

To be truly tailored, any rural development approach must reflect the goals, skills and talents of all parts of the community, which necessitates inclusively identifying those existing goals and assets, and creating culturally relevant strategies that build on them. And to be truly inclusive, the approach to engaging the community needs to be tailored to the local context, in that it needs to be focused on the groups that have had the least voice in decision-making and face the greatest barriers to advancement, which can differ from community to community. Furthermore, many rural communities of color have been subject to decades of systemic disinvestment that has in some cases undermined the formal institutional infrastructure in those communities. As such, it is especially important that any attempt to support marginalized rural communities of color reflect their particular needs and capacities.

Tailored + Collaborative

Rural development is truly tailored when the needs and opportunities of the community are identified through a collaborative process that brings people together from all different sectors within the community. In addition, to be as effective as possible, the partners involved in any collaboration need to be tailored to the specific community context, as well as the development opportunity being pursued. Otherwise, there is a risk that the partners

FIGURE 1
The Four TRIC Principles Are Deeply Interrelated



around the table aren't the ones most relevant in that specific community or for the specific endeavor.

Tailored + Resilient

Tailoring your approach makes it more resilient because it then reflects the assets, goals and desires of the specific community in which you are working. As a result, the members of the community are more likely to see themselves and their hopes and dreams in the plan, increasing the likelihood that they take ownership to drive it forward and stick with it over time. A development plan copied from another community and not adapted to the local context may achieve limited success in the short run, but if it does not reflect the values and abilities of the local community, it has little chance of enduring over the long term.

Resilient + Collaborative

To be truly resilient, a rural development plan must be developed through a collaborative approach so that everyone has a stake in the solution and carries it forward. This helps to ensure it is not reliant on one person or organization should that person or organization leave or otherwise not be able to contribute. In addition, the most sustainable collaborations are those built with an eye toward resilience. Community leaders building such collaborations intentionally consider how to keep the partners together over the long term.

Resilient + Inclusive

Resilience also necessitates being inclusive so that future community leaders participate in developing the plan and, as a result, are committed to carrying it forward after the current leaders retire or move on. Furthermore, rural communities cannot be resilient if their most vulnerable residents remain at risk. For example, if low-income homeowners do not have adequate access to post-disaster assistance, flood insurance, accumulated wealth, or other resources to prepare for or recover from a natural disaster, they won't be able to repair and rebuild their homes. This could deteriorate the community's local housing stock, which in many rural communities is already stretched thin. This could limit a community's ability to attract workers, put downward pressure on property tax receipts, or throw off the community's development plans in myriad other ways. Lastly, efforts to be inclusive must also be designed with resilience in mind. Inclusion at one point in time, with no thought given to how individual groups will continue to be engaged in and benefit from the process long term, is not likely to create lasting benefits for the most traditionally underserved groups in the community.

Inclusive + Collaborative

True inclusion is also by definition collaborative, in that collaboration involves inviting all groups to the table, listening to their perspectives and incorporating their ideas. It also means creating shared leadership and power in deciding the path forward for the community and shared ownership in the community's future. Activities to engage with marginalized community members that do not involve sharing any decision-making power and ownership are better characterized as tokenism than true inclusion. One way to mitigate this is to build in feedback mechanisms, to allow all residents at the collaborative table to assess the degree to which they feel they have a share in the community's future, share their assessment with the group, and then work together to course-correct. This regular practice will help the group ensure inclusion and collaboration are moving in tandem.

Conclusion

Rural communities are incredibly diverse, each with its own history, culture, and industrial and demographic mix. But no matter their history or present circumstances, every rural community has a wealth of assets that can be leveraged to foster shared economic prosperity for all living there. To make the best use of those assets, rural communities should tailor their approach, build it on a foundation of resilience and inclusivity, and proceed collaboratively at every step of the way.

While we have focused on the applicability of the TRIC framework to rural communities, we fully believe this framework could lead to transformational change in suburban and urban communities as well if applied in those contexts. A community integrating any one of these principles into its development approach will likely see better results than it would have without doing so; however, the full potential of this framework can be realized only when all four principles are implemented together. This is because each element of the framework relies on the others to be successful.

Many of our communities today are at a crossroads where leaders and residents are discerning which direction to travel next. The TRIC framework can aid communities by bolstering the capacity necessary to successfully proceed. This approach can help ensure that the path along which a community advances leads to a destination where everyone shares in its economic prosperity.

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Endnotes

1 See, for example, Pender et al., and Ratner.

2 See WealthWorks.

3 See, for example, Kania and Kramer.