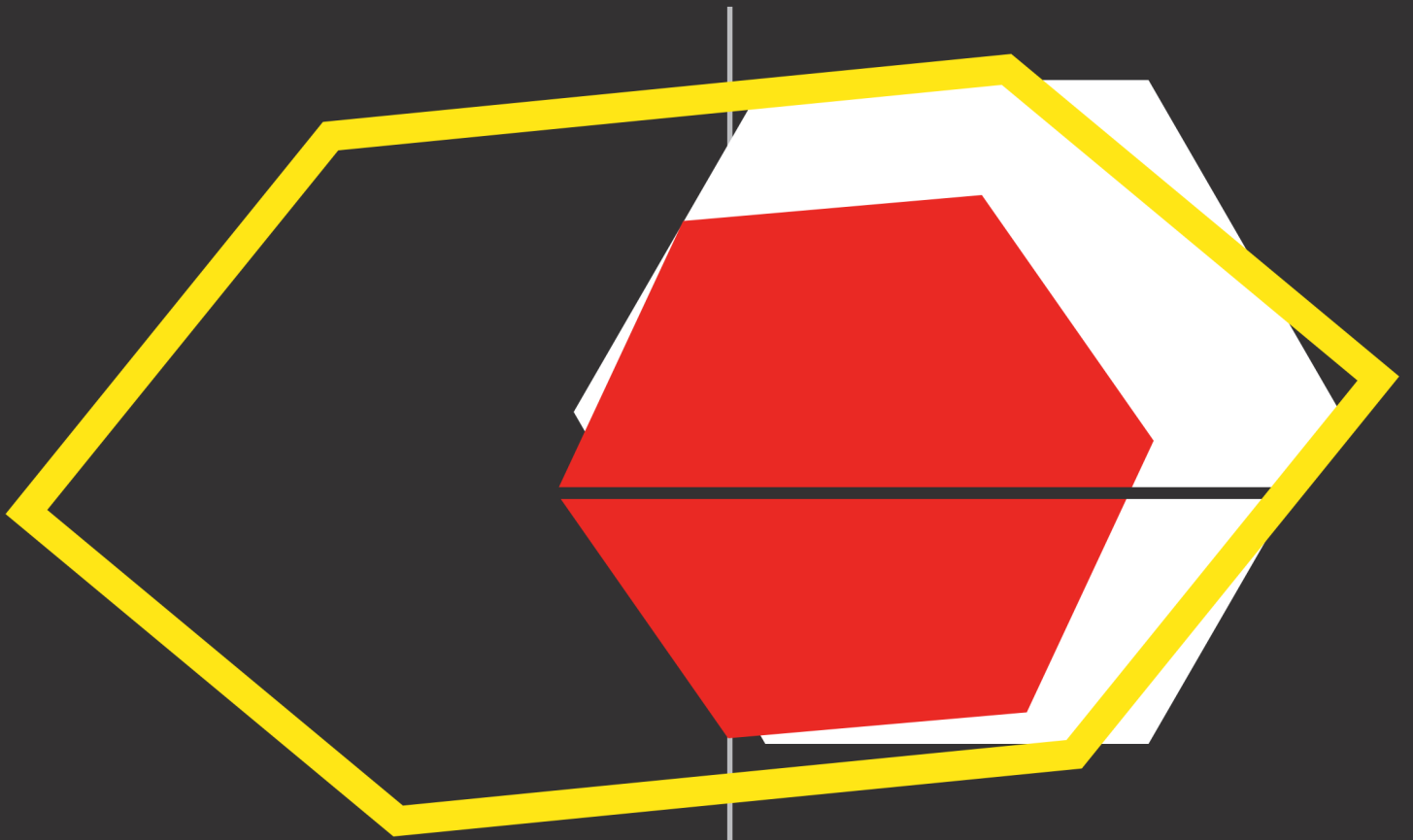


EYE ON THE PRIZE



**Expanding Our
Understanding of
Geography in
Anti-Racist
Community Development**

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RESOURCE TO SAVE TIME OR FOR EASIER
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“What can happen to our practice when we include every community rather than brushing over them? What more could we as a community development sector learn if we fully embraced the strengths and innovations of these overlooked communities – and celebrated and resourced them?”

- THE PEOPLE’S PRACTICE, ISSUE 10

Sometimes, it seems like we’re operating with a very unclear geography in the United States. We commonly use “urban” as a euphemism for communities of color, despite a movement of white people back to urban settings. We think of “suburb” as middle-class and white, despite the growing diversity of suburbs. We use “rural” as a shorthand for less affluent white communities, despite growing diversity and a whole range of incomes in rural America. We have a weak collective recognition that tribal nations even exist – or that Native Americans live in urban, suburban and rural non-tribal communities across the country.

There’s at least some rationale for these mental shortcuts. Segregation, redlining, exploitative treaties and racial violence pushed people of color into largely urban geographies. Blockbusting, white flight and government subsidy pushed white people into others. The problem, though, is that the reality of suburban, rural and tribal life looks a lot different today than these stereotypes suggest. That presents a big challenge for community development, and especially any effort seeking to advance anti-racist community development. The sector’s understanding, its offerings and its support infrastructure are largely situated in cities. Without concerted attention, that leaves non-urban communities of color with limited resourcing, and it robs us all of an awareness of, and access, to important equity work they’re leading – and have led since the advent of the community development sector.

It doesn’t have to be that way, though. In this resource, we’re sharing some incredible work happening on the ground in places the sector too often ignores. We’ll consider six promising practices for how we can collectively support anti-racist community development in different community contexts.

WHY IT MATTERS

If we don’t fully recognize rural, suburban and tribal communities of color, we may inadvertently reinforce dominant narratives about who people of color are and the range of experiences they have.

If we don’t have an understanding of how urban, rural, suburban and tribal communities are interconnected, the community development sector will be less effective in moving regional economic systems in more equitable directions.

If we don’t acknowledge the long history of equitable development work in rural, suburban and tribal communities – like multi-use community centers, land trusts and legal challenges to real estate discrimination – we’ll be less effective in scaling these kinds of efforts.

If we don’t build infrastructure that supports equitable development in rural, suburban and tribal communities, our sector won’t be able to adapt to changing demographic patterns, and our work won’t serve many of the people we’re trying to reach.

If rural, suburban and tribal communities don’t connect to broader coalitions doing this work, they’ll likely continue to have scarce access to resources.

If we don’t elevate the actual, on-the-ground experiences of rural, suburban and tribal communities of color, dominant narratives will continue to shape local decision-making processes and outcomes.

If we don’t explore where and how rural, suburban and tribal communities of color’s challenges and priorities overlap with urban communities of color, we’ll be less effective at influencing state and federal policy.

If we don’t explore the root causes of how structural racism impacts domestic migration, we’re far more likely to see repetitions of harmful patterns of white flight and disinvestment in rural and suburban communities.

six PROMISING PRACTICES

Even though structural racism in and around community development might play out in different ways in different geographies, there are still some pretty common patterns that operate in all kinds of settings. Across geographies, there are systemic forces that hold residents of color back. Across geographies, there are people actively combating this through strong, sustained equitable community development policy and practice. Perhaps the largest difference is that there's less national attention and national resourcing of rural, suburban and tribal geographies to address these challenges and push forward these solutions. Below, we profile six practices that our stakeholder interviews and literature review highlighted as particularly promising. Each practice responds to specific geographic contexts but still has at least some applicability across geographic siloes. Each practice also considers the lack of national infrastructure to support this work – and how we can all do a better job of connecting our work across geographic divides.

PROMISING PRACTICE 1: ACKNOWLEDGE THE PARTICULAR CONTEXTS OF EQUITABLE SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT.

Suburban communities have a fraught history when it comes to matters of race. They benefited from massive public subsidies like highway construction and GI Bill benefits, while often actively excluding (or removing) residents of color. That legacy may be blinding us from a newer reality – that people of color are moving into suburbs for access to more spacious homes, high-quality school systems and perceived quality of life. That movement has not addressed underlying conditions that reduce economic and social opportunities for people of color, regardless of where they live. Some suburbs are trending toward significantly higher poverty rates. Others are falling victim to the same displacement pressures facing many urban communities. These are particularly troubling patterns given the explicit history of biased suburban policymaking and the insufficiency of halfway responses like diversity initiatives.

That's not to say that suburbs aren't home to significant community activism or equitable development effort, from Evanston to East Cleveland to communities along the Interstate 85 corridor. The bigger challenge is a lack of suburban support infrastructure, especially around racially equitable community development. One way to strengthen those supports is to increase connections between urban and suburban investment. That could look like expanding the footprints of regional community development organizations; sharing resources and development strategies across municipal lines; bringing a stronger equity lens to transportation resourcing; and placing stronger emphasis on regional equity planning. A second pathway is to directly support suburbs in carrying out equitable development work on their own. National networks can tailor existing offerings to address suburban contexts. They can develop learning supports for things like reuse of common suburban building types. Perhaps most importantly, funders can expand their apertures to support organizations that are working with and for suburban communities of color and low-income communities.

PROMISING PRACTICE 2: FULLY ADDRESS THE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF RURAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.

Rural communities face some of the same structural barriers as suburbs when it comes to advancing racially equitable community development. Rural America is often framed as white and poor ... without recognizing the long history of rural communities of color, the broad income ranges across rural geographies or that these areas are diversifying. As a sector, community development often fails to address specific rural contexts around distance and density. It fails to have sufficient support infrastructure or to move equitable rural development forward. And perhaps most importantly, it fails to recognize the specific challenges that rural communities of color face or to elevate their solutions.

We can start to address these gaps by increasing attention to rural policymaking – providing specific learning supports to rural policymakers, helping rural development organizations tap into existing state and federal resources and investing more fully in rural organizing capacity and sustainability.

We can support cross-sector, holistic approaches that are particularly important in rural communities, where there are simply fewer organizations to do the work. That could look like more intentionality around bringing arts and culture into equitable development work, like in Springboard for the Arts' Rural Regenerator Fellowship, or leveraging the assets and knowledge of healthcare anchors, like in Build Healthy Places Network's work around rural healthcare partnerships. Just as in urban communities, we can prioritize building rural communities' capacities around wealth-building within, instead of being exclusively reliant on recruiting external employers and investments. Throughout, we should build competencies – and grassroots relationships – to address challenges that might be particularly acute for rural communities of color, like reliable and affordable access to the Internet, quality healthcare and legal services.

PROMISING PRACTICE 3: INCREASE VISIBILITY AND SUPPORT OF NATIVE COMMUNITIES ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS.

While there is a lack of awareness and support infrastructure for communities of color in suburban and rural geographies, this dynamic is perhaps even more pronounced for Indigenous communities. As a country, we have a striking lack of familiarity with Native American, Native Hawaiian and Native Alaskan communities ... and that tends to be the case across geographies. We fail to recognize or understand the hundreds of federally-recognized Tribal Nations or Natives' roles in rural America, but we also fail to recognize the presence of Native communities in suburbs and cities. That general lack of awareness may contribute to Native communities' limited access to philanthropic support and barriers to accessing government funding. Those severe funding gaps can impact communities' abilities to fight back against chronic disinvestment or to address even basic needs like access to safe water.

Despite these odds, Native communities are actively advancing equitable community development work in a range of different environments, from Bears Ears Inter-tribal Coalition in rural Utah to NAYA in Portland, Oregon. This work needs considerably more community development attention and resourcing. We can start by expanding access to financial resources, including by directly investing in Native-led and Native-serving financial institutions and making targeted, long-term contributions toward community priorities like housing. We can increase access to data sets and learning supports that are explicitly relevant to Native communities. And we can directly consult with tribal communities around policies that impact their well-being, whether within federal agencies or local governments. Importantly, this support infrastructure needs to span across both rural and urban contexts.

PROMISING PRACTICE 4: BRING UNLIKE COMMUNITIES TOGETHER AROUND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT LEARNING AND STRATEGY.

At its best, community development responds directly to specific resident priorities and solutions. That local context can look different in urban, suburban, rural and tribal communities, and yet, communities are also *connected* in ways that we don't always foreground in our work. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and successes in one can lead to successes in others through exchanges of supplies, jobs and access to services. Connecting equitable development efforts across different geographies can expand opportunities for relationship-building, learning and agenda-building, especially if we address sector power dynamics to make sure non-urban communities' equity practices are lifted up.

There are lots of different ways that we can bring people in unlike communities together around issues of common cause in advancing equitable communities. We can develop and sustain media that highlights commonalities across geographies. We can also directly connect practitioners and residents across geographic siloes. That could be explicitly about bringing people together to grapple with geographic contexts that are often presented as disconnected or even at odds with each other, like in urban-rural exchanges in Kentucky and Minnesota. Or it could look like connecting people that share some geographic context but may still not be fully connected, such as folks focusing on housing in a variety of different rural California communities or across rural Northern and Southern communities. Or it could even be about resourcing exchange between people in different contexts within the same region, like in Chicago's Folded Maps Project.

These kinds of exchanges can be structured around different kinds of collective learning, like cohorts working across different geographic contexts on solutions for advancing economic mobility, or environmentally just development, or on the nuanced experiences of Black men in different communities.

PROMISING PRACTICE 5: INVEST IN LAUNCHING AND SUSTAINING STATEWIDE EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT COALITIONS.

One of the big benefits of connecting communities across perceived differences is that we're able to build stronger coalitions in support of equitable community development. When diverse coalitions organize across race, geography and gender, for instance, they're better able to advance shared policy priorities and develop agendas to impact legislation. This kind of coalition building can be particularly impactful at a state level. Even while people within a state might be working within distinct local contexts, they also operate in a similar policy and funding environment that impacts things like how affordable housing can get built and maintained.

At the same time, community development work tends to be really localized, which can create barriers to practitioners' and residents' understanding of how to influence and inform state policy. We can start to address that by providing more learning supports for community-based folks to understand state government, including navigating relationships between local and state governments and considering state policy contexts when developing local efforts to address racial disparities. We can also do more to help local governments and community-based organizations understand and access existing state resources that support equitable development and adapt their strategies when states enact new policies that impact equity efforts. We can also connect across geographies to influence statewide equitable development policy. Statewide coalitions can draw out how seemingly different communities share some common circumstances, like Louisiana communities recovering following Hurricane Katrina or communities across Minnesota or Colorado all grappling with housing affordability. Coalitions that cut across geographic siloes can challenge the notion that issues are exclusively "urban" or exclusively "rural" – whether public school investment in Indiana or climate investment in New York.

PROMISING PRACTICE 6: PRIORITIZE NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN SUPPORTING RURAL, SUBURBAN AND TRIBAL EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT.

The link between harmful narratives and inequitable investment cuts across geographic lines. Funding may not be reaching Tribal Nations because of a lack of awareness or a belief that investment is not legally permissible. Funding may not be reaching rural communities because of a belief that they are sparsely populated and resistant to investment. Dominant community development narratives were frequently pointed to across The People's Practice's research and are seen as significantly harmful to urban communities of color. They might be playing even more consequential roles in places like suburbs, where the "stickiness" of old stories is misrepresenting what today's suburbs are, what opportunities and threats they face and who lives in them.

Just like in urban communities, rural, suburban and tribal equitable development can benefit from lifting up more accurate counternarratives. Data can support these counternarratives, like in the Rural Aperture Project's elevation of equity issues in rural communities or the Indigenous Futures Survey's highlighting of Native communities' challenges and priorities. Beyond quantitative data, we can shift narratives by foregrounding realities of life in these communities, such as by documenting how Little Saigon residents are fighting displacement despite limited resourcing. Pushing back on dominant, inaccurate narratives can also reveal messages that emphasize why communities matter in the first place. That includes Chester, Pennsylvania's work to reconnect to its maker history; Appalshop's effort to dispel stereotypes about Appalachia by uplifting stories of contemporary creativity; and the move to have more candid conversations about the history and current contexts of race in places like New Rochelle. Local narrative work in rural, suburban and tribal communities can be particularly powerful when they highlight culturally-specific experiences that might be almost entirely unacknowledged nationally, such as the experiences of Hmong, Melungeon and Gullah Geechee residents.

When we talk about rural, suburban and tribal communities across the United States, we're talking about an immense physical geography and huge numbers of residents. In the previous pages, we outlined promising practices we're seeing in these communities (and in support of these communities). But in such an enormous geography, one size cannot possibly fit all. There are so many ways to put these practices into action, depending on specific social and cultural contexts, guided by the priorities and recommended solutions of the people who live there.

Below, we capture more examples of individuals, organizations and coalitions around the United States who are working to advance these promising practices in their own ways.

ACKNOWLEDGE PARTICULAR CONTEXTS OF EQUITABLE SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT.

[Alliance to End Homelessness in Suburban Cook County](#)

[Forward Through Ferguson](#)

[Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies](#)

[PolicyLink](#)

[Prince George's County](#)

FULLY ADDRESS THE NEEDS AND PRIORITIES OF RURAL COMMUNITIES OF COLOR.

[Center for American Progress](#)

[Enterprise Community Partners](#)

[Partners for Rural Transformation](#)

[National Community Reinvestment Coalition](#)

[The Forge](#)

INCREASE SUPPORT OF NATIVE COMMUNITIES ACROSS GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXTS.

[ACLU of North Dakota](#)

[First Nations Development Institute](#)

[Native American Health Center](#)

[Safety, Training, Technical Assistance and Resource Support \(STTARS\) Indigenous Safe Housing Center](#)

[State of California Native American Heritage Commission](#)

BRING UNLIKE COMMUNITIES TOGETHER AROUND EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT.

[Art of the Rural](#)

[Just Action](#)

[National League of Cities and the Rural Community Assistance Partnership](#)

[Stateline](#)

[Wormfarm Institute](#)

INVEST IN LAUNCHING AND SUSTAINING STATEWIDE EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT COALITIONS.

[Community Opportunity Alliance](#)

[National Zoning Atlas](#)

[Ohio Community Development Corporation Association](#)

[Smart Growth America](#)

[Voices for Racial Justice](#)

PRIORITIZE NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN RURAL, SUBURBAN AND TRIBAL EQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT.

[Black in Appalachia: Research, Education & Support](#)

[ChangeLab Solutions and The Praxis Project](#)

[Equitable Development Data Insight Training Initiative](#)

[First Nations Development Institute and EchoHawk Consulting Group](#)

[Highlander Research and Education Center](#)

The People's Practice

We hope you've found something promising in these practices!

Feeling inspired to keep going deep on anti-racist community development?

Visit us at www.thepeoplespractice.org for additional op-eds, Q+As, research, resources and more!

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