

LOCAL FOODS: BUILDING HEALTH & WEALTH FROM THE GROUND UP IN REGION 5 EQUITABLE ECONOMIC ECOSYSTEMS

Suomalainen
Tomaatti
4€/kg

Suomalainen
Sivokkala
10€/kg

Suomalainen
Avomaatturisku
3€/kg



REGION FIVE
Development Commission

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Local Foods: Building Health & Wealth from the Ground Up in Region 5

A locally produced food system is one of three value chain (VC) focal points in Region Five Development Commission's (R5DC) Equitable Economic Ecosystem (EEE) initiative for regional prosperity. Since 2010, the region has intentionally focused efforts toward creating a regional food system that generates local wealth and provides access to healthy affordable local foods. Protecting watersheds and using sustainable agriculture practices also figure prominently in this initiative.

In this report on current work, we will highlight a few of the champions and their progress. And tomorrow? The path is cloudy with the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating impact on health, community, and economy. However, we know that food and food security are key to recovery and rebuilding through and after the pandemic we all share. We cannot be short-sighted and forgo the health of our natural resources if we are to survive and thrive out of this natural and man-made disaster.

This report updates the Local Foods VC and Welcoming Communities Advocacy Group (WCAG) initiatives of the EEE project. The other two VC and WCAG efforts, updated in separate reports, include Solar Energy and Placemaking-Arts & Culture.

"The specific challenge for R5DC is finding support that helps us expand programming (for which we are trained and have the capacity to deliver) that benefits marginalized and low-income communities. Much of our traditionally allocated funding supports economic ecosystems that do not consider or incent fair and just systems where all people can prosper. Systems change that builds wealth and multiple forms of wealth - done in ways that authentically and equitably include diverse cultures - is an intentional practice and takes steadfast commitment."

**Cheryal Hills, Executive Director
Region Five Development Commission**

Acknowledgements:

Arlene Jones, Executive Director, Fallon Ryan, Community Engagement Coordinator, Sprout MN; Quinn Swanson, Executive Director, Jim Chamberlin, Project Manager, Happy Dancing Turtle (HDT); Cheryal Hills, Executive Director, Dawn Espe Senior Regional Development Planner, Angela Anderson, Marketing Director, Region Five Development Commission (R5DC), Jane Leonard, President, Monica Segura-Schwartz, Policy and Outreach Consultant, Growth & Justice; Stacey J. Stockdill, CEO/Founder, EnSearch, Inc. R5DC EEE project reports can be downloaded at www.regionfive.org/resources.

Project Background

In 2019, R5DC received funding from the Northwest Area Foundation to begin advancing a [sequenced strategy to construct equitable economic ecosystems \(EEE\)](#) for regional prosperity in their five-county region of Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena counties in Central Minnesota, from the community-level origins and spread across the region. The initiative features [Welcoming Communities Advocacy Groups \(WCAG\)](#) and Value Chain (VC) development to help support workforce attraction and strengthen cultural agility in the five-county service area. This report focuses on the Local Foods VC and Local Foods WCAG pilot communities.

These current efforts build on a base of R5DC's long-term work in rural and regional resilience across sectors and municipalities, including those aimed to recover from the Great Recession (2008-2010), which left the region's communities facing the worst economic crash since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Ten years ago, hundreds of citizens from the region met many times to envision and lay groundwork for a brighter future for their children and grandchildren. The initiative was one of the first to meaningfully engage marginalized and disadvantaged populations in the region.

Out of that work, [Local Foods](#) was identified as an important economic engine and a core area to be addressed by future activity, alongside the necessity to maintain natural resource assets and improve water quality in a watershed (the Mississippi River watershed) serving not only Minnesota but the United States as well. It's one of three core engines propelling the current EEE project, from both a welcoming (diverse, equitable, inclusive) community perspective, and a value chain economic development perspective. Local Foods work also strikes and holds the necessary balance between economic development and environmental stewardship. See the 2018 and 2019 [WealthWorks reports](#) that further describes the local food systems, arts/culture and agriculture relationships and work in regional efforts preceding the EEE initiative.

Fast forward to 2020: the EEE is now buffeted by the health and economic collapse wreaked upon the area (and the world) by the Covid-19 pandemic, topping the Great Recession and Great Depression in its destructive fury. The 2020 pandemic has uncovered fully the social and economic inequities and disparities that pre-dated Covid-19 in the region; EEE initiative efforts are more relevant than ever as all sectors in R5DC attempt to recover and rebuild towards a new normal, this time for more equitable community and economic development going forward.

As noted above, the EEE project focuses on investments in three community and economic value chain community-based pilots -- in local food systems, placemaking (arts & culture), and sustainable renewable energy --and the eight forms of wealth (capital) in the central MN rural region based on the WealthWorks model: financial, cultural, intellectual, social, individual, natural, built, and political (see endnotes for more details).

The foundations underpinning such comprehensive systems change are collaboration and intentionality: in welcoming diverse people and ideas, in building social and financial equity by all for all, in inclusion of all those affected by and effecting change, and, in aligning resources and talent across sectors and disciplines to accomplish such systems change. Learning from these community-based EEE pilots, R5DC seeks to modernize rural community and economic development approaches to fit the changing needs and opportunities of 21st Century small towns and rural regions.

The quest for sustainable and shared regional prosperity emerged out of documented and persistent regional needs to address demographics shifts and economic challenges in Greater Minnesota, from workforce development and recruitment to business succession and more, as acknowledged in the 2019 (and ongoing) DevelopMN strategic plan, created by the MN Association of Development Organizations (MADO) to guide regional competitiveness across Greater Minnesota.

The DevelopMN plan echoes the ideas and emerging practices to overcome regional, racial, and environmental inequities and disparities identified across the urban-rural spectrum in Minnesota by the companion (and also living document) 2020 Minnesota Equity Blueprint. R5DC and other MADO members helped create the Blueprint alongside hundreds of Minnesotans and other organizations in the Thriving by Design Network – Rural & Urban Together, via a community engagement, research, analysis, and writing process co-hosted by Growth & Justice and OneMN.org.

The specific factors inspiring the current EEE project, and noted in both the DevelopMN and Blueprint documents, and at play in the region (and across much of Minnesota) pre-COVID 19, and now further exacerbated by the pandemic, are the following:

- Dwindling existing economic drivers are inadequate to support existing and emerging economic challenges and opportunities such as workforce and entrepreneurial development for current and potential residents. The region's five service territory's economic development origins were historically rooted in agriculture. Today, tourism, manufacturing and some agribusiness are its primary—and insufficient—economic engines.
- Lack of opportunity and cultural amenities further discourage young workers, families, newcomers, and potential home-comers from coming to raise their families and/or retire/refire to hometowns and seasonal cabins as permanent residents.
- The declining general population – heavily weighted by an aging, mostly white, population-- is shrinking local economies and the tax base while increasing burdens upon current workers for the funding of entitlement programs and local public services and education.
- Systemic barriers to education and workforce credentialing prevent immigrant newcomers and disadvantaged communities of color to help fill the need for skilled workers.

Also a troubling concern: the rise of hate groups in central MN. They have always been present in the shadows, but emerged in recent years more publicly to protest and express hostility towards anyone or anything perceived to be threatening their way of life: immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ persons, inclusive community planning, and yes, even local foods initiatives. The region's community and business leaders welcome talent, ideas, and resources from all corners of the state and the globe. The hate groups increase fear and anxiety about people and cultures seen as unacceptably "different". This rise in hate is both a moral challenge and a massive barrier to the already difficult efforts to improve community and economic conditions for ALL members of the community.

The Equitable Economic Systems initiative seeks to dislodge the cultural inertia and increase the public courage to be welcoming. It further seeks to increase welcoming community advocacy groups to help build welcoming communities. These actions lay the necessary social groundwork for a modernized approach to rural community and economic development – an approach based on welcoming diversity and building value chains/interconnections of all kinds to foster economic innovation and equitably grow vibrant, inclusive communities.

Why is this important?

The first quarter of the 21st century presents a number of challenges and opportunities to rural Minnesota as it charts its economic future. An economy driven by innovation demands that we create an environment that nurtures talent and workforce, supports entrepreneurship, and creates community conditions that welcome and support the innovation powers of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For rural Minnesota to succeed, strong, collective and credible voices need to create and move forward an equitable economic ecosystems agenda at the local, state, and federal level.

The Region Five Development Commission's EEE initiative is developing and propelling those voices – and actions -- for positive and productive change, not only for central MN but as a model for small towns and rural areas state and nationwide to follow. Indeed, as we struggle now through the Covid-19 crisis, made worse by pre-existing conditions of regional, racial, and environmental inequities and disparities, can we emerge a more just, equitable, and inclusive society going forward? We say YES! We must do so to save and strengthen our communities.

Equitable Economic Ecosystems - Local Foods Projects in Region 5

Much of what was envisioned in the original rural resilience efforts a decade ago is evident in the rural/urban solutions posed by DevelopMN and the Minnesota Equity Blueprint. Since 2010, the region has intentionally focused efforts toward creating a regional food system that combats food insecurity, generates local wealth, and provides access to healthy affordable local foods. In addition, protecting watersheds and practicing sustainable agriculture have been at the heart of the work of many community members within the region. In the following examples, we highlight the work thus far for the Equitable Economic Ecosystems initiative featuring the Local Foods Value Chain and pilot Welcoming Communities Advocacy Groups.



Sprout MN

The Sprout and R5DC partnership began in 2015 to help grow the local foods movement in the Region 5 service area. Growers, eaters, creatives, and economic developers together established Sprout in 2012. With a mission to connect and strengthen the local food system as a regional asset, this community of interest and places continues to grow and contribute to our collective story of a vibrant and resilient Central Minnesota.

Sprout initiatives show how food, art, and culture are core and integrated in the promotion of health, sustainability, and vitality. Sprout works to connect these elements in ways that increase healthy food access, encourage entrepreneurship, and cultivate creativity.

The Sprout story includes a multi-dimensional approach to the procurement of, and promoting the expansion of, local foods within the five-county region. Sprout coordinates farm-to-school programs, wholesale distribution to restaurants, hospitals, long-term care and assisted living facilities, and direct-to-consumer through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs. It is now working with over 100 small family farms in rural central MN. Building on the community-driven Resilient Region plan, Sprout partnered with R5DC to open a regional food distribution and processing facility, called Sprout MN. Sprout MN boasts two fully licensed kitchens, warehousing for aggregation and distribution, and an indoor market - Sprout Growers & Makers Marketplace, in Little Falls, MN. Sprout held its grand opening in April 2016.

Its mobile market first rolled out in 2019, bringing food out of the aisles and on the road to areas which lack access to healthy, nutritious foods. Sprout's relationship with local growers and producers puts the freshest fare en route to rural communities, meeting residents where they are.

Its commercial grade kitchen provides entrepreneurs a place to develop their ideas into saleable products and to learn from seasoned chefs.



Financial Wealth



R5DC plays a critical role as partner in the growth of local growers and makers. Its micro-lending dollars target growers and artists as an underserved population. In 2017, \$106,200 microloans were distributed; this grew to \$431,351 in 2019 (a 306% increase). From 2017-19, loans totaling \$587,551 were extended to 13 low-income businesses in the region – which resulted in 79 jobs created and 39 jobs retained. In addition, 50% of the interest made on loans was reinvested into the different lending pools to underwrite future lending opportunities.

R5DC and Sprout worked together between 2013 and 2019 to secure nearly \$2 million through grants and loans to support the local foods value chain.

Improved Health and Food Security thru Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

RxCSA & VetsCSA were new initiatives that emerged from the successful Choose Health CSA program. Although the final evaluation data were not yet available at the time this report was published, if the RxCSA and VetsCSA efforts mirror predecessor initiatives, we will see changes in behavior and in health outcomes. Since 2014 when the Choose Health CSA project was first launched in Region 5, there has been a 149% increase in the number of households participating (175 in 2014 and 435 in 2019). Another way to look at the value of the CSA model is to convert “pounds” of food into number of meals. The number of meals served since 2014 is 97,093.



Natural Wealth



Sprout initiatives have helped to preserve farmland and add local acres into production. Since 2017 the number of acres of farmland preserved has grown by 2,088 acres (a 55% increase from 3,767.35 in 2017 to 4,855.68 in 2019). An additional 2,748.78 acres are in production. Use of **High Tunnels** also extended the growing season in our cold Minnesota climate. High Tunnel season expansion has helped local growers increase their sales. Since 2017, 95 high tunnels went into production generating an additional 7,679 square feet for cold-weather growing.



Political Wealth



Political wealth generated; adds equity in several ways. As the number of local, state and federal partners engaged in local foods within the five-county region has expanded, the combined political power has helped open doors for more equitable and inclusive grant application processes. For example, R5DC is a member of Minnesota Department of Agriculture's Good Food Access Program Advisory Committee. R5DC suggested that MDA accept grant applications in other languages, offering non-English-speaking residents greater access to the program opportunity. Then-MDA Commissioner David Fredrickson approved the recommendation; it was the first time that a state agency accepted grant applications in any language other than English.

Cultural Wealth



With a focus on featuring the diversity of cultures within the region, including the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Latino, Somali, East African, Amish, and youth populations -- and encouraging all to interact around food, music, art, and makers -- one of the most vital outcomes from the Sprout MarketPlace was the building of intercultural relationships between diverse populations within the region. This effort transformed what were once primarily all-white crowds of vendors and buyers to an amazing tapestry of diverse participants for the 2019 markets.



Happy Dancing Turtle

Happy Dancing Turtle (HDT), a nonprofit organization based in Pine River, MN, is dedicated to growing good stewards of the planet by providing education, programs, and experiences for youth and adults that inspire wonder and empower change. Programming includes Back to Basics, Eco-Camps, presentations/tours, collaboration with Educators, and expanding their work to the Driftless Region in southeastern Minnesota promoting sustainable living through a variety of outreach and educational activities. (<https://www.happydancingturtle.org/index.php>).

HDT's work in local foods has been shaped, in part, by feasibility studies, including a [Central Minnesota Local Food Innovation Center Feasibility study in 2015](#) and one in 2017, the [Central Minnesota Rural Food Hub Case Study](#). Both reports noted that the local foods movement is rapidly growing, led by Sprout MN and others. The study also recognized that local conditions can and should influence the scope and type of local foods investments.

HDT's and Sprout's work to support local producers. The staff at HDT provides meaningful guidance to local producers in their growing and ranching operations. They often serve as teachers and partners at Back-to-Basics and at events such as those sponsored by The Forage Council and the Sustainable Agriculture Association. Sprout has also provided workshops and training for growers. Workshops have focused on a number of topics such as post-harvest handling training, farm food safety plans, Core 4 Business training, pricing strategies, marketing, grant writing, QuickBooks, human resources and retention; **556 individuals participated in these workshops.**

Sprout has also supported local growers through the MarketPlace in more ways than direct business assistance. In one case, they helped support a new producer in the area who was experiencing overt racism that threatened to destroy their business. Both Sprout and Region Five Development Commission are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. They have stood firm for community improvement efforts that benefit ALL community members, despite the harassing efforts of anti-immigrant and anti-government groups in the region.

Protecting Natural Resources and Clean Water. A behind-the-scenes aspect of the HDT work is the building of helpful relationships between producers and lakeshore owners, supporting the sustainable agriculture work, serving on the board for the Forage Council and Pine River Watershed Alliance, and, assisting with the water-quality work of the Nature Conservancy and the Our Mississippi Our Future initiatives. HDT staff are go-to people in the region to address soil conservation/health and water quality challenges and opportunities.

Regional Partners: The Nature Conservancy. The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Why is that important for Region 5 and others downstream? Because Region 5 is located in the heart of the Mississippi Headwaters – the source of drinking water for more than 1 million residents in Minnesota and a critical infrastructure resource for the country as well.

The Nature Conservancy, HDT, and many other regional partners including staff from R5DC, have worked together to support the Our Mississippi Our Future and to craft number of proposals to further build and restore natural capital. Although not yet funded, these natural capital investments remain priorities for the region. An example is the Working Lands for Drinking Water proposal which uses several data sets and scientific analysis with geographic information systems (GIS) to layer the multiple benefits derived from keeping working grasslands and forests intact.

Harvest Meals

There are many in Region Five who are working to preserve natural resources and bring growers/producers and lakeshore owners together, including the Forage Council and Sprout through their Harvest Meals. According to Ron Meyer, Chair of the Pine River Watershed Alliance, the idea for a harvest meal came out of a Forage Council meeting when the question came up as to “How do we get the Lake People and Producers together to work together on water quality?” Mike Sams, now head of the Cass County Farm Bureau said, “The only way to get people together is over a meal.” It is an enjoyable event and a way to build needed trust and knowledge exchange.

Pine River Watershed

Another important partner in the region has been the Pine River Watershed Alliance (PRWA). The mission of the alliance is to protect and preserve the Pine River Watershed’s land and water quality. Recently PRWA was recognized because it was able to develop a One Watershed One Plan in record time and under budget. R5DC played a role in writing the plan. We conclude the Local Foods story with excerpts from an interview with Ron Meyer, PRWA Chair, describing why he believes PRWA was so successful. Like all projects described here, success (or not) comes down to relationships!

“We at Pine River Watershed started three years ago to develop a close relationship with Crow Wing Soil and Water (CWSW). That partnership has been amazing. I attribute a lot of the success of our One Watershed One Plan – how fast we did it, how well it was done – to CWSW putting together a team of people and then the commitment of the people. We had a very broad-based group. We were able to stay on track. Sometimes when you get farmers, mayors, and so forth on a group – they all have a different agenda and sometimes those meetings can go into oblivion. In our case our meetings didn’t. We stayed focused on what we wanted to do, what were our issues, and how do we think we want to move forward with addressing them.

“Having extra money left over from the One Watershed One Plan development gave us a chance to start right away with grazing management. The grazing management is going to become a pilot for all the other activities we have in the plan.....We hired two farmers to do an inventory by talking with local landowners about how they are using their land. We completed that inventory and we are now in the position of working with 13 producers who are interested in learning more about sustainable grazing management practices. We are going back to these 13 and putting together detailed action plans.”

Concluding Thoughts

Many of the activities and goals set forth in the original rural resilience initiatives of a decade ago continue with the current Local Foods Value Chain development and Welcoming Communities Advocacy Groups to create an Equitable Economic Ecosystem for regional prosperity in Region 5. The Local Foods community efforts clearly show and make use of the strong interrelationships between local food production and processing, land management for sustaining natural resources and, particularly the incalculable value-add for community and economic development provided by stewardship in and for the Mississippi River watershed. It is a value chain truly emblematic of the complex and inter-layered development work required to achieve an equitable economic ecosystem, one that advances flourishing communities for all who live and work in the region.

Attachment on Interrelated Initiatives & Operating Frameworks

Two major community and economic development strategy plans – DevelopMN for Greater Minnesota, and the Minnesota Equity Blueprint for the state as a whole, across the rural urban spectrum – form the contextual and operational guidance system for the R5DC EEE initiative. Here is a brief description of each and links for more information:

DevelopMN (2019) <http://www.mnado.org/developmn/>

This plan represents a collaborative effort of the members of the Minnesota Association of Development Organizations (MADO) to align strategic economic development efforts throughout Greater Minnesota, and leverage resources at all levels for a greater overall development impact.

Two decades into the 21st century, communities in rural Minnesota continue to face unique challenges and opportunities as they chart their economic future.

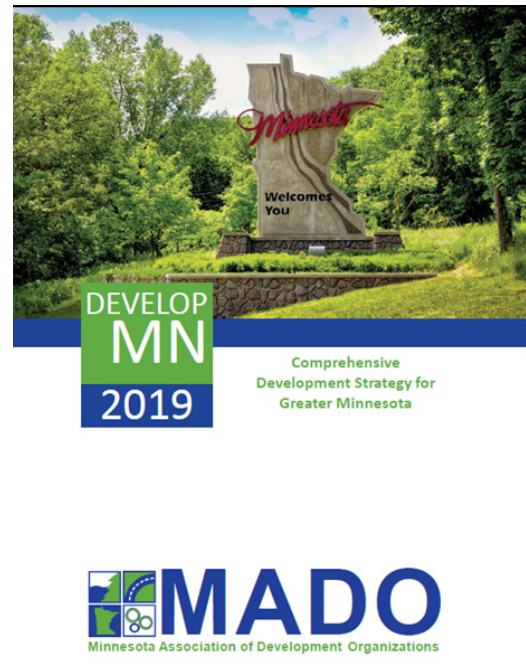
Minnesotans live in an economy driven by innovation demands. Responsive regions nurture their workforce, support a culture of entrepreneurship and encourage strong and diverse communities.

Minnesota Regional Development Organizations are working collectively to accomplish the following:

- Create a common framework for regional economic plans, including a template for data collection, assessment, strategies, and measures of success
- Develop regional strategies that address the special challenges and opportunities of each part of the state
- Create a framework for state action that will enhance and support economic development efforts at the local and regional level
- Develop and implement an approach that effectively engages state partners
- Raise the bar on what constitutes effective rural economic development in Minnesota

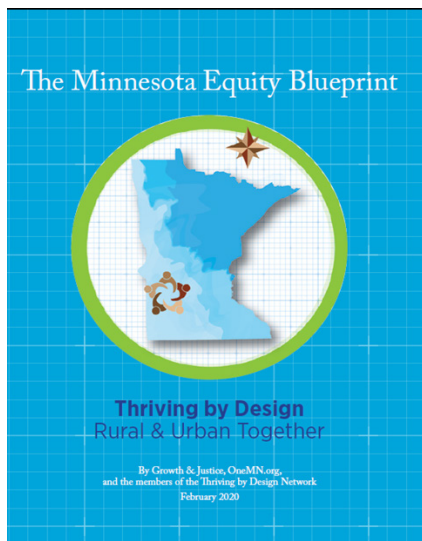
For rural Minnesota to succeed there is a need for a credible collective voice that can create and propel an economic agenda at the local, state and federal levels. Develop MN advances a common framework for regional economic development. It identifies **four cornerstone strategies for strong regions and communities: Human Capital, Economic Competitiveness, Community Resources, and Foundational Assets.**

These strategies address the special challenges and opportunities of Greater Minnesota and enhance and support economic development efforts on all levels and engage local, regional, state and federal partners. Collectively, MADO and its partners will set a higher standard for what constitutes effective rural economic development in Minnesota. <http://www.mnado.org>



The Minnesota Equity Blueprint: Thriving by Design Rural & Urban Together (Feb. 2020) <https://growthandjustice.org/facts.fixes>

Widening inequalities and climate change pose the most important and immediate challenges to Minnesota's long-term economic prosperity and quality-of-life. The Minnesota Equity Blueprint serves as a comprehensive policy guidebook for the next decade, to address these demographic and geographic disparities, to build a more inclusive economy, to find more common cause between rural and urban Minnesotans and to restore our natural environment.



The Blueprint is a comprehensive, non-partisan, long-term plan for shared prosperity in a healthier environment. It's designed to reflect the interconnectedness of our state's people and regions, as well as interconnectedness between the disparities, challenges, and solutions that shape our future.

The "open source" document was co-facilitated by [Growth & Justice](#) and [OneMN.org](#) and created with the members of the [Thriving by Design Network](#) — Rural & Urban Together (TBDN).

Four chapters and multiple sections encompass challenges and emerging and recommended solutions across four key interconnected areas of community and economic development: Human Capital, Economic Development, Infrastructure, and Environmental Resilience.

The Blueprint has been designed not just for the Legislature or governmental decision-makers, but as a resource for individual and local community action. Story boxes throughout chronicle regional best practices and inspiring efforts to build a more equitable and inclusive economy.

Wealthworks Value Chain & the Eight Forms of Wealth

<https://www.wealthworks.org/basics/construct-wealthworks-value-chain>
<https://www.wealthworks.org/basics/explore-regional-wealth-building>

A WealthWorks value chain is a network of people, businesses, organizations and agencies addressing a market opportunity to meet demand for specific products or services—advancing self-interest while building rooted local and regional wealth.

The Wealthworks Eight Forms of Wealth are:

- **Built Capital** is the stock of fully functioning constructed infrastructure.
- **Financial capital** is the stock of unencumbered monetary assets invested in other forms of capital or financial instruments.
- **Individual capital** is the stock of skills and physical and mental healthiness of people in region
- **Intellectual capital** is the stock of knowledge, innovation, and creativity or imagination in a region
- **Natural capital** is the stock of unimpaired environmental assets (e.g. air, water, land, flora, fauna, etc.) in a region.
- **Political capital** is the stock of power and goodwill held by individuals, groups, and/or organizations that can be held, spent or shared to achieve desired ends.
- **Social capital** is the stock of trust, relationships, and networks that support civil society.
- **Cultural capital** is the stock of practices that reflect values and identity rooted in place, class, and/or ethnicity.

Why do we use the WealthWorks model?

Equitable Economic Ecosystems can be advanced through this proven model of rural economic development planning and plan implementation. Wealth Works or rural wealth creation, also known as the Community Capitals Framework, is practiced by a national network of diverse development organizations.

The WealthWorks approach to economic development is anchored by these values:

- Creating wealth (defined as intellectual, individual, social, natural, built, political, cultural and financial wealth) in a local community.
- Ensuring wealth is rooted through local ownership and control.
- Improving livelihoods for people and firms struggling economically.

WealthWorks offers a systematic approach that identifies enterprising opportunities in a region and engages a wide range of partners in turning those opportunities into results that both build and capture wealth. It can complement or incorporate traditional economic development methods, but intentionally focuses on creating more value that becomes rooted in local people, places and firms.

The WealthWorks approach is designed to produce and sustain these results:

- Build a more self-reliant and robust area economy.
- Bring underutilized community assets - people, place, property and know-how - into fuller participation and production.
- Create wealth that sticks - because it is locally owned, controlled and reinvested.
- Increase upward mobility overall and advance the livelihoods of lower-income people, firms and places.
- Strengthen industry sectors that fuel the economy.
- Forge valued partnerships that can ably and flexibly connect again and again to power increasingly resilient regions.

WealthWorks allows local leaders to focus on what they have—instead of what they lack—to generate multiple forms of wealth that benefit residents today and for generations to come while rooting value in local people, places, and businesses.

Scan the QR code using your smartphone camera to learn more about Wealthworks.





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