

2008 Grassroots and Groundwork Conference

***“Sharing What Works to***

***Reduce Poverty and Grow Community Prosperity’***

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Last may, I attended the Grassroots and Groundwork Conference sponsored by Northwest Areas Foundation, a National Rural Funder's Collaborative regional partner. The Northwest Areas Foundation (NWAf) focuses its resources on reducing poverty in the vast geographical area of the Northern Plains region, including Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, and Washington. Grassroots and Groundwork is fast becoming the convening event of the region, bringing together a cross section of philanthropy, community-based non profits, and public and private sector stakeholders to discuss poverty.

What distinguishes this convening from other gatherings is that NWAf continues to utilize its resources outside of their role as a funder, and pulls together the various civic and social fabric sectors of the Plains region. What is so unique or important about convening people to talk about strategies that are working to reduce poverty? The gems of this gathering are not only the usual expert panelists, but the willingness of NWAf to devote program time to authentic grassroots leaders working on reducing poverty in places like Westhope, ND, population 500.

The Plains region is the heartland of our country and where the success, ingenuity, and production of the U.S. agricultural economy is touted and upheld as one of the basic tenets of our country's national identity. These are the states where rural landscapes, national parks and public lands remain unscathed, retaining their natural beauty. These places are known for hard work and prosperity, dating back to the days of the Homestead Act and the influx of European immigrants, who settled the West as a part of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. It's the land of the "can do" attitude.

However, the realities of poverty are not often reflected in our descriptions of this region or their struggles. As a resident of the region for over a year, I can

tell you poverty is not the word we use to speak about the economic and broader social challenges we encounter in the region. In fact, I would agree poverty is too limiting of a term because it is a difficult concept to grasp for most individuals and leaders in these communities.

Quite frankly, poverty has been portrayed and discussed so heavily nationally, in the media and within the field of philanthropy, as an urban issue affecting communities of color. However, when it is portrayed as existing outside of the urban landscape, more likely it is identified as a 'southern regional' issue. How poverty is described and even approached leaves out many of those individuals, who experience poverty in a different manner.

If we describe poverty as the loss of opportunity, crumbling public infrastructure, access to non-standard housing, loss of the local school, inability to consolidate resources and operate regionally, and the continued out-migration of young people, we can have a robust discussion about poverty, but one that negates the often polarizing effects of poverty. Additionally, as the faces of poverty become more inclusive, including white people, the often overlooked Native Americans and growing immigrant communities, a broader, comprehensive base of support can be built to address poverty in the region.

Through the Grassroots and Groundwork conference, NAAF is transforming and expanding the discussion of poverty as it impacts individuals and communities, in a region where it traditionally has not been part of the culture or lexicon. This is an important role that a regional foundation can facilitate, especially in a region where strategic philanthropy (except Minnesota) is virtually non-existent within the region but, also where three states rank in the bottom ten states that rank significantly below the rest of the country in terms of in-state foundation assets and per-capita foundation grants received.

The Grassroots and Groundwork conference should be looked as a "gateway of opportunity" to think creatively, strategically, and collaboratively to tackle the issues of community development, social justice, and strengthening the nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructure capacity in the region. More importantly, it offers those foundations eager to engage in rural grantmaking an opportunity to enhance their learning about the region, make connections with experienced practitioners working on the ground in places that remain isolated from philanthropy, and form cooperative programming between foundations.

NAAF is not without critics, but they are deserving of recognition for their willingness to foster an agenda that brings poverty into the forefront of a region's discussion. How often do we ask ourselves the question, *philanthropy for what?* It appears that the Grassroots and Groundwork Conference is at least trying to get at that ever important question.

Although, NAAF and the communities they serve through grantmaking may not have all the answers, their willingness to increase and direct our attention to

poverty and the public will it generates, may be the grounding we need to begin mobilizing our efforts.