



CIRS STRATEGIC COMPASS

COMPASS ELEMENTS:

- Overview
- People & Place
- Purpose (Mission & Vision)
- Principles & Practices
- Strategic Roadmap

Overview

This strategic compass was created by Executive Director Ildi Carlisle-Cummins in partnership with the CIRS Board of Directors in the spring of 2020, during a three-part planning session led by strategy consultant Rosa Gonzales. This compass will guide decision-making, program development and fundraising for CIRS over the course of the next decade, which is the term that Ildi expects to serve as Director.

CIRS will actively use this tool to rebuild, root deeply in rural California, and create a thriving, relevant organization that turns research into tools for social transformation.

People & Place

Typical strategic planning tools describe missions and visions before they address the people and places that an organization serves. In our case, it felt important to move people and place to the very top of our compass tool. A major project for CIRS over the next ten years is to create organizational structures that ensure that we are led by people of color from rural California and that our work invests in rural places that have been sites of extraction throughout the history of California. In this moment of our organizational development, it feels critical to emphasize *who* we are, before we say what we do.

CIRS exists to provide tools to social movements which are fighting against patterns of extraction, exploitation and exclusion in rural California. These patterns define the geography of our work and we pay special attention to them in the agricultural industry, which often dominates rural landscapes. We focus our partnerships in communities of color where those patterns often have the longest histories.

CIRS work draws on our understanding of the history of systemic violence towards Black, Indigenous and farmworker and communities in rural California who have often been made invisible, or who have been the subjects of research, while being denied control over research agendas and platforms to tell their own stories. One use of this

strategic compass is to ensure that the structure of CIRS itself reflects that understanding, so that our staff, board and closest partners are made up of people from communities with histories of extraction.

In addition to being rooted in these rural communities, CIRS staff and board are:

- **Researchers** with deep community relationships, committed to equity who help to navigate communication barriers and address power imbalances between "researchers" and "researched"
- **Storytellers** combining traditional methods of communicating research (reports) with other forms (podcasts, visual art, video) to uplift stories of rural CA told by people from rural CA
- **Community organizers** building capacity for rural communities to use research for change and to set rural research agendas

CIRS' partners include:

- Rural community members
- Community organizers and activists
- Researchers and students committed to transformative research relationships with communities working for social justice
- Art-activists
- Networks/coalitions of social justice organizations working in rural America
- Policymakers and systems leaders
- People across CA and the nation who follow and support our work

Purpose

(Revised Mission)

The California Institute for Rural Studies conducts community-driven research for action in rural communities working for justice, equity and health.

(Revised Vision)

Rural life in California is radically transformed as systems of oppression and extraction give way to systems which are life-affirming, sensitive to many types of knowledge, equitable and reflective of the rich cultural landscape of rural California.

(CIRS Work)

CIRS creates research-based tools in partnership with rural communities of color who are working to eradicate white supremacy, take down colonial power structures and replace dysfunctional institutions. Our research methods reflect our belief that people have the right to tell their own stories and that research which deepens their ability to understand, interpret and describe their lived realities is a key for social transformation.

Principles & Practices (Values)

Principles	Practices
Accountability to Community	We ensure our work aligns with the priorities of rural communities most impacted by inequities; collaborating directly with communities in support of their organizing and advocacy goals. Strategy screening question: Is this work that the community is asking for?
Distributed Leadership	We go beyond the one charismatic leader approach to ensure many voices, and more distributed influence and power to advance our vision and strategy. Strategy screening question: Who is leading this work and how can they work in partnership with someone who has never led this type of work before?
Community Expertise	We listen to impacted communities and influence other institutions to do the same; ensuring rural communities have what they need to tell their own stories, assess their own situations, and put forward their own solutions. Prioritize indigenous and local leadership. Strategy screening question: Who is representing this work publicly?
The Value of Data & (Hi)Story	We keep the histories of rural communities alive; amplifying indigenous histories and worldview; using data and story to strengthen organizing and advocacy efforts, and the quest for lasting solutions to the problems rural communities face. Strategy screening question: Is this work rooted in the history of the issue/place/people at the center of the work?
Bridging Research & Organizing	We connect the skills of social science research to organizing and advocacy leaders and campaigns on the ground; research for action. Strategy screening question: Does this work provide tools for action?
Creative & Responsive Methods	We go beyond traditional academic research methods; engaging the arts, storytelling, participatory action research. Strategy screening question: Are the methods used for this project as exciting as the findings?
Direct & Indirect Impact	We put out reports and forge collaborations that can result in large strategic investments in rural communities and/or shifts in how the field approaches the work; not just about the immediate return. Strategy screening question: Does this work point to long-term, systemic change and does the budget of the project redistribute resources to rural California?
Data Partners	We play a unique role (conducting and contributing research, data, and stories) in healthy relationships with other players in the social justice movement. Strategy screening question: Does this work provide data to the movement?
Agility	We take on strategic work while remaining nimble enough to shift strategy as conditions change overtime; not getting locked into foundation-driven work. Strategy screening question: Does this work respond to a current issue or need?
Influencing Academia	We stay in dialogue with academic institutions, serving in a watch-dog role and encouraging them to prioritize rural studies long term. Strategy screening question: Are there ways to share the methods and findings of this work with colleagues in academia?

Strategic Roadmap 2020-2030

Goals and Strategies

Over the next ten years, CIRS will:

- 1) Become a thriving, sustainable organization rooted in rural California with a dedicated and committed staff and board:
 - a) CIRS Staff and Board is made up of people from communities in rural CA impacted by extraction
 - b) Develop a culture of capacity-building where we share tools/knowledge/coaching (i.e. every researcher works with an intern) and ensure that staff have opportunities for professional development and advancement
 - c) CIRS project budgets prioritize and track resource distribution to communities that have typically been places of resource extraction in rural California (majority of CIRS funds are invested in rural CA)

- 2) Support the next generation of researchers from rural California by providing them opportunities to unpack their experiences with academia, connect with seasoned community-engaged researchers, lead research projects and develop tools for action in their communities:
 - a) Develop Community Research Collaboratives that bring together researchers and community members/advocates in a regular, facilitated way to support the co-creation of research agendas and projects (pilot in the Eastern Coachella Valley)
 - b) Use the Rural Justice Summit as a primary gathering space where researchers and communities come together to chart a course for research and identify priorities annually
 - c) Develop a CIRS post-doc program for researchers from rural CA who are people of color, queer folks, women, indigenous people, immigrants (and others who are typically marginalized in the academy). At CIRS, they conduct community-based research projects and continue to develop (or rebuild) their academic identities, in partnership with a network of seasoned rural researchers.
 - d) Conduct an analysis of researchers focused on rural issues across the CSU and UC systems—identify current professors and grad students working on these issues. Hire next generation

researchers, and pair them as needed with our research "elders" to lead CIRS projects.

- e) Develop "Research-Engaged Practice" Toolkits and workshops in many languages to increase capacity for rural community leaders to engage with research projects and direct research agendas.

3) Conduct responsive research that is driven by community needs and led by community partners.

- a) Lead research projects to investigate questions and produce primary data on topics that communities tell us are critical issues (through the Rural Justice Summit, other networks/partnerships).
- b) Build research/data analysts/data storytelling capacity throughout rural CA by ensuring that communities who have partnered with us on a research project always have a better understanding of the research process when we finish a project.

4) Engage in Research-Based Storytelling for Change

- a) Continue to produce Cal Ag Roots stories that shed light on history of CA agriculture—work with a stable of co-producers from across CA to make these.
- b) Highlight Art-activism at the Rural Justice Summit and use this as a key storytelling tool
- c) Produce Tools for Action from all CIRS research projects: easily-understandable translations in relevant languages (written, audio, visual) of research that makes clear, specific, action-able recommendations for change.
- d) Whenever possible, connect CIRS research to policy work at the local, state and federal levels.

5) Speak up for Rural California in State and National Networks

- a) Participate in key alliances such as HEAL, Food Chain Workers Alliance, Imagining America
- b) Maintain an active social media presence in order to share CIRS work
- c) Revive the Rural California Report—give it a website, media presence, podcast—and commission articles on relevant topics