

The Mid South Delta

Collaborating for Change in the Delta

Conveners

The Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
The Walton Foundation
The W. K. Kellogg Foundation
The National Rural Funders Collaborative

A once thriving agricultural region where cotton was king and the blues the royal processional, the Mid-South Delta is now a shadow of its former self. In the last century, the Delta has experienced increasing disinvestment, abandonment and hopelessness due to the loss of jobs stemming from the mechanization of the cotton industry and agribusiness, the diminution of textile and furniture manufacturing, the corresponding persistence and pervasiveness of poverty, and the lingering effects of segregation and racism. While soybeans, catfish farming, and casinos have been added in the last decade or so to the region's economic portfolio, the Delta has been largely unsuccessful at luring major new industries to help revitalize Delta economies. Furthermore, recent decades have been marked by increasingly poor employment, low incomes, low education, poor health, high infant mortality and dependence.

These recent indicators of the Delta's demise seem to be changing, thanks in part to the attention that the Delta Commission of 1988 brought to these issues. In the decade or so since the Commission's creation, there have been signs that some of these trends have been abated – if not reversed. Most importantly, there now exists at the beginning of the 21st century a new spirit of hopefulness and increasing evidence that the human and social capital of the Delta is expanding—thereby laying the foundation for a new era of leadership, community prosperity and family well-being.

On May 20-21, 2003, a group of national and regional funders, government officials and regional intermediaries met at the Winrock International Conference Center on Petit Jean Mountain, Arkansas to begin a first conversation on developing a public/private collaborative investment strategy capable of igniting the economic climate of the region and capitalizing on the burgeoning social and leadership potential. Those present represented a broad range of interests and experiences within the Delta. Without minimizing the difficulty of the tasks still ahead, those gathered in Arkansas for this two-day convening began the two-fold task of reviewing the impact and significance of public and private investment since the Delta Commission's formation and of asking what new opportunities now exist that afford the possibility of more strategic collaborative relationships and action across governmental agencies and through public-private partnerships.

Current Findings: the Delta at a Glance

- ? In 55 counties in **Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana**, the average family income is less than 80 percent of the national average.
- ? At least 20 percent of the population lives at or below the poverty level.
- ? Unemployment in many counties exceeds the national rate by 50 percent.
- ? Among the poor, Blacks are almost twice as likely as their white counterparts regionally to live below poverty.
- ? Access to healthcare still a problem; only one new hospital in the entire 55 county region.

But there is good news:

- ? On the whole, the banking institutions have grown, though the number of locally-led banks have declined, particularly in the Mississippi counties of Quitman, Bolivar, etc.
- ? There has been an increase in nonprofit infrastructure and intermediary organizations.
- ? State-supported IDA programs now exist in Arkansas and Louisiana, but not yet in Mississippi.
- ? Childcare money has increased, but only 14% of eligible kids have access to funds.
- ? Economic growth, particularly around urban centers, has been spurred by casinos, meaning white, middle-class growth in these areas; yet this suburban phenomenon has been accompanied by low or no growth in most rural areas.
- ? Some regional dialogue has begun, but state governments are not yet involved.
- ? “People know the issues;” they just need technical and financial tools to make things happen.

Discussion Framework

Given these findings, private funders, government representatives and nonprofit intermediaries identified several issues to frame the conversation about future opportunities for collaboration:

- ? *What are the current initiatives in the region and how successful have they been in bringing about economic and social change?*
- ? *What would distinguish any new and current efforts at collaboration in the Delta from other past attempts to address regional issues?*
- ? *What are the driving interests and priorities of those gathered and what could this group agree to do together?*
- ? *Would the historic power dynamics and mistrust that permeate racial and social relationships in the Delta derail any attempt for collaborative investment?*

Challenges and Opportunities

In light of this discussion framework, the following represent the more salient assertions and considerations for the work ahead:

- *Racism and power imbalance has been a major hindrance and must be overcome if change is going to happen.*
- *All sectors of the community must be engaged in the change process to successfully bridge the racial divide.*
- *The opportunities for entrepreneurship and small business development have been limited in the past, but are becoming more prevalent thanks to increased technical assistance and better access to capital within the Delta. More must be done to encourage women and minority owned businesses.*
- *Greater connectedness and partnerships are needed within and across sectors. Other federal agencies need to be at the table e.g. transportation, commerce, education, small business administration.*
- *More efficient, effective ways must be devised for getting available assistance to poor families and to more fully utilize various benefit programs e.g. EITC, TANF, training dollars under WIA. CHIP.*
- *An expanded leadership base is needed, particularly among young people.*
- *Existing successes and initiatives that are working must achieve greater scale and capacity. Capacity is growing, but not yet at the level of visible impact. One exception may be housing because of efforts like Mid-South Delta LISC (2,000 housing units are now under construction).*
- *New models of philanthropy are needed, capable of:*

 - *Addressing race and power issues*
 - *Developing common definitions and evaluation frameworks for community change*
 - *Increasing cooperation across government agencies and public-private partnerships for measurable progress*
 - *Building the capacity of rural nonprofit organizations and grassroots groups working toward lasting change*

- *The intermediary sector needs to be strengthened in order to have the ability to*
 - Transfer capacity to local groups and communities
 - Have relevant benchmarks to measure their progress in achieving desired outcomes
 - Have financial and political independence

- ? *Nonprofit Sector needs include*
 - Greater investment in small rural community-based organizations and CDCs are agents for change agents
 - Flexible, direct funding for on-the-ground work
 - A variety of micro- and macro- approaches to address complex needs from local to regional levels.

Next Steps: Where do we go from here?

Given the findings, discussion framework and assertions/considerations noted above, the parties gathered on Petit Jean Mountain agreed to reconvene to consider more concretely the next steps leading toward an actionable agenda. The following questions will serve to guide the next conversation:

1. Though infrastructure has expanded in the last ten years (e.g., Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, Southern Development Bancorp., Foundation for the Mid South, Mid South Delta LISC), what are the next infrastructure needs to maintain and accelerate growth and development within the region?
2. What are the alternatives to proliferation of 501(c)(3) organizations? How can groups work across community and share infrastructure and resources in ways that promote collaboration and synergy and result in greater impact and leverage?
3. How do we move beyond isolated, stovepipe approaches to funding to more integrated and collaborative funding?
4. How do we work beyond traditional power boundaries and include grassroots voices at the table? How do we develop new leaders with diverse perspectives and foster leadership structures that capitalize on differences?
5. What are the ways to increase economic alternatives and options for people living in persistent poverty?
6. What policies need to be addressed at all levels to focus resources and attention on traditionally marginalized audiences?