

The Deep South Wealth Creation Network, Mississippi and Alabama

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Background: The Deep South Wealth Creation Network works to develop agricultural value chains for the purpose of sustaining the natural resources and improving the livelihoods of rural African American families in Alabama and Mississippi. The Network is comprised of several community-based and institutional organizations including: Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, Cottage House, MileSton Cooperative, National Wildlife Federation, Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative, Tougaloo College and The United Christian Community Association.

Since 2011, members of the Network have worked in partnership with the Ford Foundation's Wealth Creation and Rural Livelihoods Initiative. Initial research funded by the Ford Foundation identified and assessed the possible and existing components of the value chain, defined a set of investment and capacity needs for growing the value chain, and uncovered the opportunities and challenges related to value chain development. Motivated by the results of this research, the Network is constructing agricultural value chains in rural areas of Mississippi and Alabama.

Value chains use a systems or wealth creation approach to business and are designed to create multiple forms of wealth for all partners. They are based upon shared economic, social and environmental values and provide the infrastructure for producers, processors, marketers and buyers to work together and derive mutual benefit from meeting a market demand. The focus is on building long-term investment for partners rather than only generating short-term income.

Context: Rural communities in Mississippi and Alabama have historically faced persistent challenges that have placed African Americans at the heart of massive change and innovation. It is here in these two states, where the Civil Rights struggle began and where significant historical, cultural and political changes have transformed the United States over the past 50 years. Despite these changes and the inspiring fundamental shifts in the socio-economic and political system, Mississippi and Alabama still experience entrenched poverty, low education rates, and systemic racism. An undervaluing of education, limited local control of resources, continued outward migration of youth, and a narrative characterized by what people do not have rather than what they do possess has led to weakened community capacities and the disenfranchisement of many rural communities. And yet, hope and opportunity are growing.

Hope and opportunity: The Deep South Wealth Creation Network celebrates and continues the civil rights struggle by using the vast natural and human assets within the region to create a new economic future for African Americans in the South. Specifically, the organizations see opportunities to build sustainable livelihoods in the region by building upon people's knowledge of the land and strengthening agricultural value chains. When people create good livelihoods for themselves and their families, they build and grow their own assets. They generate and hold financial assets; they acquire new skills, education, and knowledge and they collectively build upon and sustain the natural and cultural assets of their region. Rural communities in Mississippi and Alabama already have an abundance of fertile land and a large number of landowners who are skilled with a generational knowledge of the soil, climate, and environmental assets of the region. The Deep South Wealth Creation Network builds on these

existing assets to link farmers into a value chain where they work together to meet the food demands from high-end restaurants, large-scale institutional buyers, and local schools while investing in a shared infrastructure and receiving the training required to succeed in a competitive market place.

Goals and successes: The Deep South Wealth Creation Network aims to establish at least two value chains for members so that local products can be sold into wholesale and retail markets. The revenues earned are re-invested to support the continued development of value chains and to encourage the involvement of youth and other community members. There have been several successes including:

- Organized groups of farmers in the sub-regions of Southeast Alabama, the Mississippi Delta, and a two-state sub-region of West Alabama and East Mississippi
- Developed a Farmers' Cooperative in Mississippi
- Gained food handling and processing certification from state and federal departments
- Marketed and sold more than 35,000 pounds of produce.
- Trained growers on a universal farming protocols and provided them with technical assistance to maximize product yield
- Acquired liability insurance for farmers
- Purchased shared equipment and infrastructure (refrigeration, irrigation, transportation)
- Created entry points to wholesale markets for small farmers
- Provided mentorship opportunities for youth to enter agricultural work
- Created job opportunities on farms that need support with harvesting, traveling, planting.

Challenges: The Network is expanding but several challenges remain. A uniform record keeping system is needed for producers and intermediary groups helping the farmers in order to manage workflow and to respond to inquiries for data. More investment is required for small farmers to meet increased demands for their product and to expand into more competitive markets. A marketing and recruitment strategy is needed to encourage youth to view farming as a viable and legitimate career. Farmers need to be encouraged to follow the growing protocols developed by the University and College partners in order to prevent reduced crop yields and/or inferior products. Local and state policies that benefit large-scale commercial farmers but may discourage the expansion of smaller farms owned by African Americans must be challenged and changed.

Conclusion: The Deep South Wealth Creation Network is continuing to develop fully functioning value chains for rural African Americans in Alabama and Mississippi that create access to wholesale markets, increase wealth for all producers, provide opportunities for entrepreneurs, and improve the quality of life for rural communities. The Network has been successful in establishing trust and creating hope among its members by becoming a vehicle for regional cooperation and innovation. African American farmers see how the collective power of the organization deepens the impact and expands the scale of their individual efforts. By building upon the knowledge of local people and by helping them to recognize the potential of the assets they possess, the Network has changed the previous and disempowering narrative of have not to have much.