

Partnerships and Changing How People Think

“Hard to reach.” That’s an interesting choice of words I heard someone recently use to describe the Mid South’s rural areas. The Mid South—Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi—possesses large, open areas of farmland that, at one time, helped to make cotton king and placed our three states among the most vibrant and economically flush in the nation. After the Civil War, our region’s economy and population changed significantly and it still struggles to find a competitive advantage in the nation’s and world’s economy. Despite the creativity, resilience, and resourcefulness of its people, the Mid South currently ranks among the poorest, unhealthiest, and least educationally competitive states in the nation.

Interestingly, the phrase does not clarify whether “hard to reach” describes the geographic location or the receptiveness of local residents to outside interests, ideas, and assistance. This is particularly relevant when one recognizes that in some areas of the Mid South, there are small, unincorporated communities comprised of eighth generation families—and they ain’t going anywhere, or changing their tune, anytime soon. The history of these communities and their leadership directly affects their ability to create an atmosphere that supports the creation of new, diverse, and inclusive partnerships and ideas to tackle their community’s most significant barriers to progress.

What Does Rural Mean?

Merriam-Webster defines rural as “open land, relating to the country, or agriculture.” To add further clarity, organizations like the U.S. Census Bureau, the Office of Management and Budget, and the Economic Research Service of the United States have defined rural areas through quantifiable criteria and labels for the various stages of community development, based upon an area’s population, workforce, or geography.

While I’m sure these labels are helpful to government folks and scholars, the reality is that the concept of rural is as diverse as the landscape of our nation. Understandably, it is difficult to grasp the various aspects of what constitutes a “rural” area. In line with most definitions, rural can describe small, agriculture communities. Rural in other areas can be classified as a geographically isolated community or one that does not have a strong economic driver to boost the local economy. One test does work particularly well when determining whether an area is rural or not: Ask the locals—they’ll tell you the correct answer.

In the Mid South, our experience with the concept of rural encompasses much of what most—I believe—would consider rural. In the Delta region of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, we have many sparsely populated communities, unincorporated areas, and economies driven predominantly by agriculture. But just as the tapestry of rural areas nationally is varied, the Mid South is quite varied, too. For instance, many communities, such as those in the Mississippi Gulf Coast, might not be viewed as rural in the traditional sense, but many of these communities still meet the criteria in population size and economies. Other areas, such as east Mississippi and west Arkansas, also consist of small, unincorporated hamlets but are home to either an anchor industry (like Wal-Mart in northwest Arkansas) or universities (like Mississippi State University and the University of Mississippi in northeast Mississippi).

Also, the changing landscape and environment of the Mid South plays an integral role in the formation and sustainability of communities. The Delta possesses some of the best farmland in the nation because of the richness of the soil that is deposited by the Mississippi river. But pollution and other environmental conditions over the years (some of which our area has inherited from the North) are affecting the agriculture and fishing industries in our region. Another Mid South area, South Louisiana, boasts many economic assets that range from sugar cane to coffee to oil and natural gas, but this part of the state is dotted with very small communities due, in part, to the geography along the Gulf in Louisiana that makes it difficult to develop because of the wetlands and its propensity to flood.

Context Matters

In the deep South, when one requests a soft drink—regardless the flavor or manufacturer—it is oftentimes referred to as “a Coke.” When the beverage arrives, two outcomes can be expected: Either an actual Coca-Cola is delivered, or the soda provider brings the requestor her known favorite soda, which very well may not be a Coke.

While my soda anecdote does not have much to do with how partnerships occur in rural communities, it does illustrate how even specific terms like Coke can be subjective and can mean different things to different people based upon their experiences and views. The diversity in the understanding of “rural” makes this term extremely subjective.

For example, a person’s description of their rural summer ranch out West can convey a significantly different image and connotation from that of a person who lives in the Mid South—especially those from or with knowledge of the Delta region of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. If a Mid South Delta resident were asked to define or explain the concept of rural, more than likely she would include the descriptor “poor” somewhere in the answer.

In understanding and discussing “rural” areas, context definitely matters. And in these conversations, it is important to acknowledge and accept that experience and geography will influence the topics, priorities, politics, and even the passion of discussions centered on rural areas.

The Challenges in the Rural Mid South

Over the past forty years, local and national donors and foundations have invested, and continue to invest, significantly in the Delta regions of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. Among those that have exhibited a commitment to the region’s progress have been the Walton Family Foundation, Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Margarine Casey Foundation, and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, to name a few.

This speaks volumes to the lure of the Delta. The Delta continues to be the philanthropic big fish that eludes capture, in the sense that it possesses one of the highest concentrations of poverty in the nation. Consequently, it lacks the robust tax base necessary to adequately fund and improve physical infrastructure and local

With so much in the way of resources and human capital working in the Delta, how have thoughtful and effective solutions to its problems not been found and implemented in this region? How does the fish keep getting away?

schools; it possesses a relatively unskilled, uneducated workforce; and it has a notorious history of racial, social, and economic disparity.

The Delta has been the focus for many organizations seeking to reduce poverty and to improve health, education, and racial reconciliation, among other issues. While many of these groups have made progress in their endeavors, the Delta has not undergone the renaissance that is longed for. The big fish and the solution to cure the region's woes continue to elude its captors. With so much in the way of resources and human capital working in the Delta, how have thoughtful and effective solutions to its problems not been found and implemented in this region? How does the fish keep getting away?

Donors and foundations who wish to work in the rural areas of the Mid South should make a conscious and thoughtful decision to be open to developing and adopting new strategies for how they will partner in the region. To truly meet the needs of individuals and communities, partnerships must be created that are inclusive, adaptable, diverse, trusting, and open to new ideas.

Can “Partnerships” Truly Exist in the Mid South?

Sectoral groups working in isolation on the priority issues they alone have identified are missing an opportunity to effect widespread change at the community level. Essentially, they are providing short-term solutions to remedy specific problems, but they are unable to provide the solutions that either eliminate the root cause of persistent disparities or that benefit all people in a community.

Historically speaking, many efforts in the Delta have been managed this way: Donors or organizations have created hypotheses and worked to prove the effectiveness of their ideas in a rural area in the Mid South. Sometimes, they were successful. But oftentimes, the work was conducted strictly on the experimenter's terms and excluded or alienated sectors of the community. Upon evaluation, the unsuccessful efforts tended to point to the negatives they faced: the overwhelming need, inadequate time or funding, or the lack of widespread participation or “buy in” from the community. On the other hand, we noticed that the successful efforts reflected on positives: the creativity and resourcefulness of the people, the assets a community already possesses, and the development of effective solutions based on the input of the people most affected.

In recent years, there seems to be an awareness of the importance of partnerships in efforts to improve the region. Foundations are collaborating in greater numbers and local communities are increasingly becoming part of the change that they wish to see. Many efforts are finding success due in part to this “buy in” from the local community.

While some strides are being made on the partnership front—particularly along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, severely impacted by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita—there are still areas where improvement can be made. Those wishing to effect positive change in rural areas and are seeking partnerships to do so must incorporate a holistic approach. A single, thoughtful group of like-minded folks led by a foundation or other community-based organization can make huge contributions to improving communities. But without the inclusion of those in traditional leadership positions, in business, coupled with the vision, experience, and support of local residents, these efforts will not ultimately result in solutions that are deep and wide and helpful to those most affected.

In many situations, only those who already possess the skills and competencies to become effective leaders receive the opportunities to expand their talents and serve their communities. With our region's widespread poverty and lack of human resources, the progress of our region relies heavily on identifying and building new leadership from all segments of our population. In our rural communities, attention should be focused on increasing the capacity and expanding the vision of the local, indigenous populations.

One of our region's most critical challenges to overcome in both our rural and urban areas is to change the way people think. How can leaders accept and influence others to believe the concept that poverty and a lack of inclusion diminishes the quality of life for all people—not just those of few or no resources and the disenfranchised? Instead of protecting what they consider theirs, how can we get our residents, civic leaders, business leaders, and nonprofit leaders to work together in greater numbers toward their common goals? If these efforts to form symbiotic partnerships fail to occur naturally, how can they be facilitated in thoughtful ways that are inclusive in participation and decision-making? The absence of these partnerships or of leadership's reluctance to be inclusive will only compromise the integrity of the community good and greatly reduce the potential of these communities to rise from poverty to prosperity.

Despite its many challenges, the rural Mid South possesses many significant assets, strengths, and opportunities. A critical step in formalizing partnerships and identifying goals is simply to take time to identify and better understand what a community already has to build upon. It could be a robust local school system that could be marketed to attract new industry. It could be strong and diverse leadership in the different sectors within a community that could help catalyze and endorse community improvement efforts. It could be rich and fertile land that could interest new, innovative industries to establish their bases of operations. Regardless of the carrot that is used, the stick ultimately comes down to creating real, effective, and diverse partnerships; working toward common goals; and, although they may receive support from outside sources, seeking long-term change that will improve their own communities.

Authors:

Ivy L. Allen is the President of the Foundation for the Mid South

Chris Crothers is the Communications Director for the Foundation for the Mid South

Foundation for the Mid South | 134 East Amite Street, Jackson, MS 39201 | www.fndmidsouth.org | 601.355.8167 ph 601.355.6499 fx

Partnerships and Changing How People Think is an essay that was developed for the Council on Foundation's journal on rural philanthropy *Philanthropy & Rural America* edited by Doug Rule. Contact the Council on Foundations to purchase copies of the journal or a publications catalog.

Philanthropy & Rural America

Item #515, Price \$29.95, COF Members: \$19.95

ISBN: 1-932677-60-7

888.239.5221 or visit www.cof.org/publications