

**A Look at the Mid South Delta Region:  
A Glimpse of Its Assets, Socioeconomic Complexion, and Emerging Opportunities**

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***Introduction***

The Mid South Delta Region is blessed with some of our nation's most diverse resources, resources that are linked to its cultural heritage, natural resource amenities, and vibrant agriculture and manufacturing-based economies. But, local and global forces, along with technological advancements, have brought major stresses to the region. As a result, many Delta counties and parishes continue to lose population, well trained and skilled workers are limited supply, the outflow of talented youth persists, and high rates of family and individual poverty remain part of the fabric of the region. These critical challenges make clear the importance of tackling these challenges if the long-term vitality of the region is to be advanced.

Certainly, the history of the Delta is one where local people and communities have been fractured on the basis of both race and class. Building community in the Delta requires the bridging of what remains two separate and highly unequal worlds, one white the other black (see Duncan 1999; Nylander 1998; Brown 2002; Moye 2004). In many cases, the lines dividing these worlds remain evident even to this day. Our efforts in this document are intended to recognize, from the outset, the divisiveness that has permeated the Mid South Delta region for decades, but to move forward in trying to uncover the rich set of indigenous assets that can serve as the foundation for advancing economic opportunities for marginalized residents of the region. We then give focus to the broader set of socioeconomic forces at play in the region – factors that can serve either as barriers or as opportunities for spurring asset-based community and economic development in the region. In the final section of our document, we offer our perspectives on a handful of strategies that might be considered by the NRFC and others in seeking to advance the social and economic well-being of low-wealth people and communities in the Mid South Delta Region.

***Indigenous Assets: Cultural, Political and Social Assets  
in the Mid South Delta to New Orleans Region***

This section lifts up a range of cultural and political assets in the Mid South Delta region, while also looking at the social relationships within which these communities work to create new rural economies.

The cultural assets of this region (the Mississippi Delta from Vicksburg down to New Orleans) are important considerations in thinking strategically about closing the gap in African American communities' access to economic opportunities and participation in alternative economic models. The researchers have engaged civil society leaders in the region, some of which work in the arts, and as well as an equal number who work in the public or nonprofits sectors. Few of these individuals consider arts and culture to be a core economic development option of the region, something the researchers did intentionally in order to get a broad perspective of how cultural and political assets are, or can be, a promising part of the economic portfolio in rural areas. Each conversation/interview focused on two issues or big questions:

1. What are the cultural and political assets in this region?
2. In what ways can these assets provide economic opportunities for African American communities (in ways that are not currently being utilized sufficiently)?

In scanning the region, one of the critical assets (although it exists in the context of a grave concern for the region) has been land ownership by African Americans, particularly farmland. Although African Americans are losing land at an alarming rate (9,000 acres per week), there is still a concentration of African American farm owners who are supported by stalwart regional institutions such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Land Loss Fund. NRFC is currently supporting a collaboration that targets creating demand for locally grown and caught produce through farmers markets, while also strengthening the suppliers of local produce, namely Black farmers through farmer coops. This partnership between marketumbrella.org and Mississippi Association of Cooperatives essentially is advancing the "local food and culture" economy. This economic model is clearly asset-based, and is linked to local cultural assets in the Mid South Delta region. Currently, this model connects farmers and fishers to public markets and has the potential to be expanded to area institutions such as restaurants, civic organizations, grocery stores, schools, and more – entities that value fresh, locally produced foods. What is most compelling about this important economic activity is how these types of partnership can help embrace the region's culture and can employ locally produced foods to help build community.

While food and land are important symbols of the region's cultural makeup, so too are the arts. Literature, music and art depict life, struggle and the richness in the region's African American communities. Additionally, these communities have been entrepreneurial in developing coordinated efforts to build and support local economies by

building upon history and presence of a rich culture, such as blues in the Mississippi Delta. The Mississippi Delta's tourism slogan is entitled, "The Mississippi Delta: *Where the Music Meets the Soul.*" In 2002, Indianola began the Indianola Blues Society. The Delta's writers, musicians, and artists have invested the region with imaginative appeal, from Tennessee Williams's theatrical plays of the decadent white elite, to Robert Johnson's brooding blues of a haunted crossroads in Delta, to William Faulkner's stories of the taming of the natural environment in the Delta. For too long, these cultural assets -- which African American people and communities have been central in developing -- have not translated into economic opportunity and upward mobility in proportion to the communities' contribution to these tourism-based economies. New models of bed and breakfast cooperatives, and Black-owned music and blues establishments, represent key examples of how African Americans are proactively seeking to close the opportunity gaps that inhibit them from benefiting from the opportunities that these cultural assets can afford them.

The history of the Civil Rights movement also plays a prominent role in Mississippi's cultural and political makeup. This Mid South Delta region is not homogenous in how this history plays out. The Mississippi Delta, for example, holds a significantly different place in the history of the Civil Rights Movement than does New Orleans. The Civil Rights Movement found crucial support in the Delta, putting forward a vision of the region as a source of African American political influence, and promoting the empowerment of its predominantly black population through enfranchisement and economic improvement. Voter registration drives became the battles that eventually brought political change, leading to increased African American political participation in the Delta. Civil rights leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, Aaron Henry, and Amzie Moore became central figures in a new iconography of the Delta. The historical importance of these individuals continues to be played out today in the region's political landscape. Mississippi has more African American elected officials per capita than any other state in the country. This is an enormous asset to the region that in many ways has not scratched the surface of its potential impact on providing access to economic opportunity for African American communities.

The political landscape and history of activism and resistance are all key components to the region's civic culture. It is imperative that new economic models be framed with an informed analysis and understanding of the civic culture of a place. The role of civic and cultural institutions in advancing promising economic models and connecting marginalized communities to economic opportunities is as essential, much like they were to the social movements in the region over the past half century. African American churches and cultural institutions are primed to continue to play this role. Ashe Cultural Arts Center, in central city New Orleans, represents an effort to combine the intentions of neighborhood and economic development with the awesome creative forces of community, culture and art to revive and reclaim a historically significant corridor in

Central City New Orleans: Oretha Castle-Haley Boulevard, formerly known as Dryades Street. Ashe played a key role in the central city by establishing Hope Community Credit Union in the community. Hope provides affordable financial services, such as checking and savings accounts, loans, and financial literacy workshops, that help low-wealth individuals, families, and communities secure their futures. In the recovery phase of Hurricane Katrina, among other things, Ashe mobilized community institutions and leaders to devise and implement strategies to help boost the local economic opportunities for community people. Ashe's role as a cultural institution does not represent a specific economic model, but rather exemplifies the type of community institutions that is necessary to help promote and invest in promising economic development models.

Additionally, Hurricane Katrina has impacted the region in a way that has strangely enough led to a culture of innovation. There has been such a start-up culture for social entrepreneurship post-Katrina. New Orleans, and its surrounding areas, has been deemed a startup laboratory of sorts. Much like Silicon Valley is known for technology entrepreneurs, some believe that this region will be known for social entrepreneurs. It has the opportunity to launch B Corporations (for good, for profit companies) and become the social innovation capital of the world.

### ***Exploring the Socioeconomic Complexion of the Region***

While it is important to recognize that the Delta has a host of indigenous assets, it is critical that a frank assessment of the broader social and economic factors at play in the Mid South Delta region be examined. In essence, these broader forces provide an important context for determining the socioeconomic challenges that persist, as well as the possibilities that exist for promoting wealth creation in the region.

Certainly, the problems facing the Mid South Delta region are complex and deep-seeded. As such, tackling these issues via the resurrection of traditional models of community and economic development will meet with limited success. In a dynamic global economy, local people must think differently about how best to build more resilient communities, ones committed to enhancing the voices of all people and building on the talents and assets of Delta people and places.

In this section of our report, we take a close look at the demographic, social, and economic features of the region and use our analysis to inform NRFC of the important opportunities that exist in the Mid South Delta region. The hope is that by taking a careful look at a core set of data on the region, we can begin to identify some of the key ingredients that might be incorporated into a roadmap for achieving progress in this important region of the U.S.

- **What Constitutes the Mid South Delta Region?**

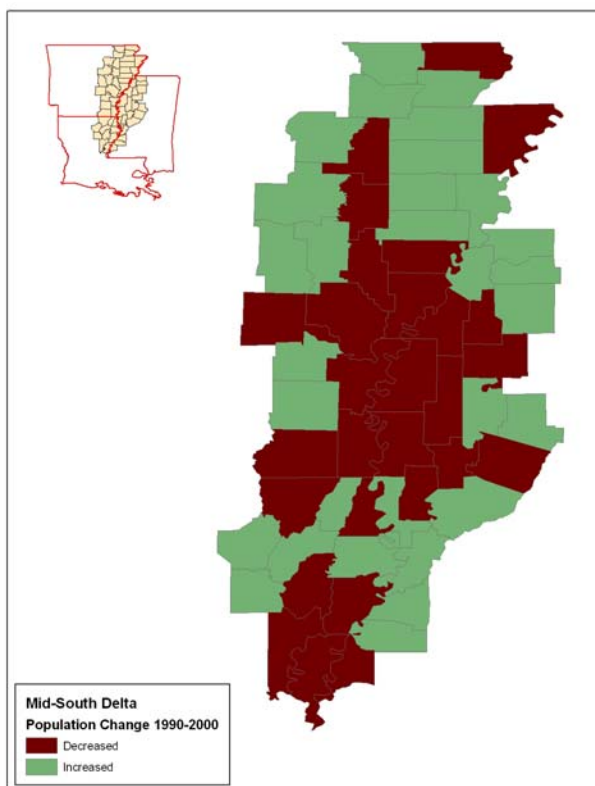
The region that is fondly called the “Mid South Delta Region” is comprised of 58 counties and parishes that are situated across the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. It represents the core portion of the region that has been described as one of the most persistent poor regions of the country. It embraces a subset of the 219 counties/parishes that were part of the area studied carried out by the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, a committee established by Congress in 1988 to develop a ten-year economic development plan for the region (Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission, 1990).

- **Where Have All the People Gone?**

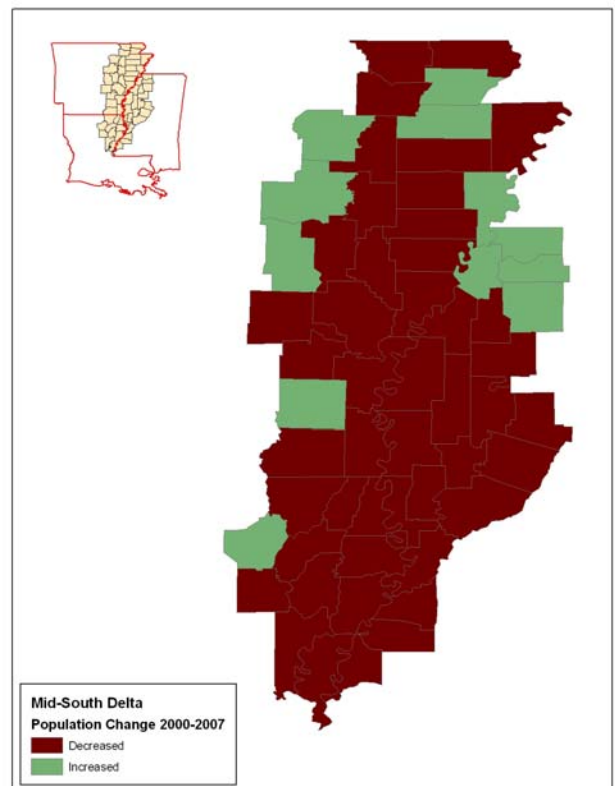
Building vibrant communities depends, in part, on the presence of a stable or expanding population. When people remain in a community and new people migrate into the area, the general assumption is that good things are happening, be they the availability of good jobs, access to decent schools, or a place with attractive quality of life features. Slow and persistent outflow of people from a community, on the other hand, can be symptomatic of an area that is facing deterioration in its social and economic base (Partridge et al. 2008).

The picture for the Mid South Region gives us reason for concern. During the course of the 1990s, a period when much of urban and rural America realized real gains in population, employment and earnings, the situation in the Mid South Delta region proved to be a mixed bag. As Figure 1 reveals, just over half of the Mid South Delta counties/parishes experienced a net growth in their populations during the 1990-2000 period. Population losses tended to occur in those counties/parishes located within the central and southernmost portions of the region.

**Figure 1. Population Change, 1990-2000**



**Figure 2. Population Change,**



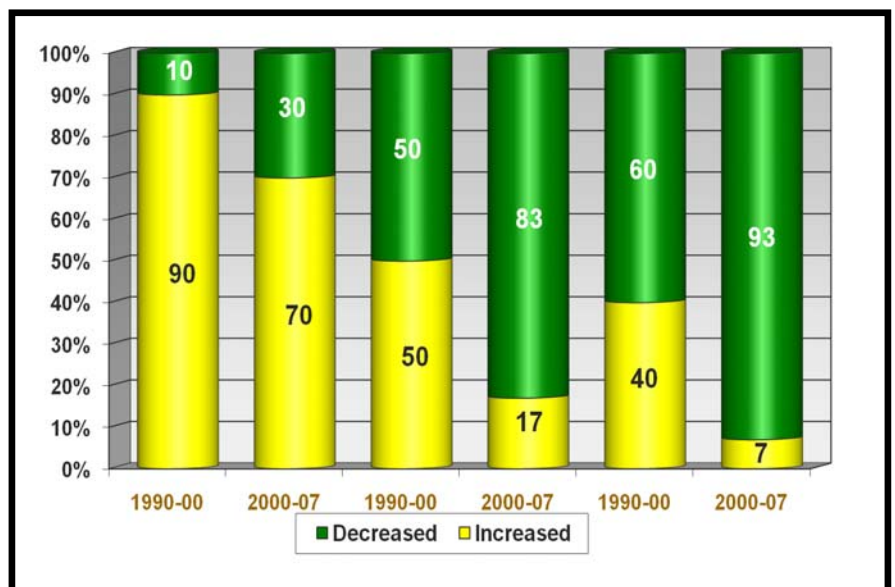
## 2000-07

The pattern since 2000 suggests that a sizable proportion of the counties/parishes in the region are feeling the pinch of a declining population (see Figure 2). The statistics offer a sobering profile of the region. Nearly 4 of every 5 counties/parishes in the region suffered a net loss in population over the 2000-07 period. While the region grew by over 88,000 persons between 1990 and 2000, the net gain in population was only 856 during the 2000-07 period.

Designation of Metropolitan Status of Counties in the U.S.	
Category	How defined
<b>Metropolitan County</b>	Central counties with urbanized areas of 50,000 or more residents; Also includes outlying counties with 25 percent or more of the employed population commuting daily into these areas.
<b>Micropolitan County</b>	Counties with one or more urban clusters of 10,000-49,999 persons. Includes outlying counties with 25 percent or more commuting into these areas.
<b>Non-Core Based County</b>	All nonmetro counties not meeting the new micro classification.

Are these trends consistent across metro and nonmetro areas of the region? The accompanying chart outlines the current definition adopted by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget to determine the metropolitan status of counties in the U.S. The three county types are metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core areas. With regard to the Mid South Delta region, 10 counties are designated metro, 18 are micropolitan, and 30 are non-core counties/parishes. As such, the bulk of counties/parishes in the region remain very rural in nature.

The information showcased in Figure 3 provides valuable insight on the dramatic differences that exist in the growth and decline of the population in the region. Be they the 1990-2000 or 2000-07 periods, a clear majority of metro counties/parishes in the Mid South region experienced population expansion. In fact, the group of 10 metro counties collectively experienced a net gain of some 78,000 people during



the 1990s, and even increased by another 62,000 since 2000. While micropolitan areas grew **Figure 3. Population Change by Metro Status, 1990-2007** by over 11,000 in the decade

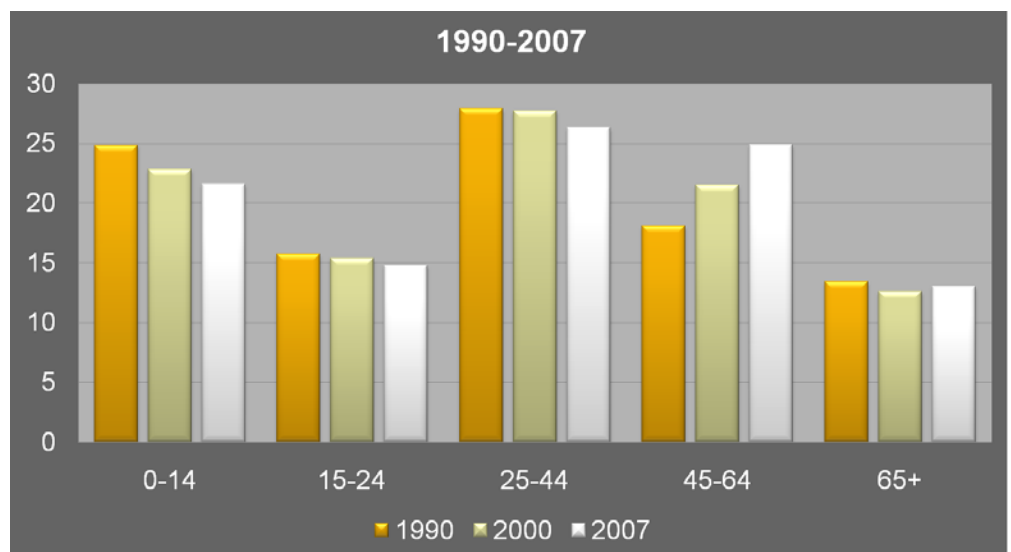
of the 1990s, they suffered a decline of 32,285 between 2000 and 2007. Approximately 83 percent of the micropolitan counties/parishes in the region lost population during this time period.

For noncore counties/parishes, the population picture has been problematic for some time, and the situation is getting worse. Sixty percent of the noncore counties suffered a net loss in their population during the 1990-2000 period. Over the most recent seven years (2000-07), the percentage of non-core counties losing population has spiraled to 93 percent. When all is said and done, the noncore counties of the Mid South region suffered a net decline of nearly 29,000 persons over the 2000-07 period.

- **Who's Living in the Mid South Region? A Look at the Population Composition of the Mid South Region**

With a declining population, one concern that often surfaces is who is left behind? Has the region witnessed a significant loss of its young people? Have people of working-age left the community in search of better jobs? Is the community becoming increasingly composed of elderly residents? Has the racial and ethnic mix of the region been impacted in any appreciable way? All are legitimate issues that deserve careful attention. In this section of our socioeconomic profile of the region, we examine the age and, racial/ethnic resources of the region.

On the surface, it is clear that the distribution of the population since the beginning of the 1990s has shifted. In essence, the region is losing a larger share of its youngest residents (those under 15 years old) and is witnessing an increasing expansion of its middle-aged population 45-64 years of age. At the same time, the 15-24, 25-44, and 65+ age cohorts are holding their own in terms of the percent of the



population falling into these age groups. **Figure 4. The Changing Age Structure of the Mid South Delta Region**

While the information outlined in Figure 4 presents the percentage distribution of the population by key age groupings, what is even more meaningful is to examine the actual numerical gains and losses experienced by each age cohort over the past several years. Here is what we find when we look at the actual counts of residents by age in the region between 2000 and 2007.

**Table 1. Numerical change in the region’s population by age, 2000-07**

Age category	2000 Population	2007 Population	Numerical Change	Percentage Change
0-14 years old	383,268	363,392	-9,876	-5.5
15-24 years old	258,922	249,514	-9,408	-3.6
25-44 years old	464,866	441,921	-22,945	-4.9
45-64 years old	360,961	418,721	57,760	16.0
65+ years old	212,569	218,043	5,474	2.6

There are at least three key issues arising from the data outlined in Table 1. First, the loss of young people under 25 years of age has approached the 20,000 mark since the year 2000. Their departure robs the region of a pool of individuals whose talents and assets are needed to guide and advance the well-being of this area over the long-term. Second, the population of the region is aging given that the largest age groups realizing positive numerical shifts are 45 years of age and above. There could be positive and negative implications associated with this skewing of the age distribution of the region, a topic that we address in the last section of this report. Finally, people of prime working age (25-44 years of age) are declining in sizable numbers (a nearly 23,000 person decline since 2000), making it difficult to pursue a more traditional economic development strategy, an approach which gives central attention to the attraction/recruitment of firms to the region.

### A Look at the Racial and Ethnic Profile of the Region

Approximately 3 of every 5 persons in the Mid South Delta region are white/non-Hispanic, while 36.2 percent are African American. While historically small, the Hispanic population in the region has been growing since 1990; from 0.6 percent in 1990 to 2.2 percent today. As Table 2 reveals, racial and ethnic minorities are becoming an increasingly larger share of the population of the region. Of special note is the proportional growth of Hispanics in the region – expanding by over 150 percent during the 1990s, and by 42.3 percent since 2000. Although the number of

**Table 2. The Racial/Ethnic Composition of the Region, 1990-2007**

Race/Ethnicity	1990	2000	2007	Percent Change, 1990-	Percent Change, 2000-
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				2000	07
White, non-Hispanic	1,012,742	1,055,294	1,043,369	4.2	-1.1
Black, non-Hispanic	561,348	603,475	608,676	7.5	0.9
Hispanic	10,325	25,842	36,764	150.3	42.3

Hispanics remains small (less than 37,000 persons), the likelihood is quite strong that the growth of Hispanics in the region will continue at a hefty pace, thus further accelerating the racial/ethnic diversity of the region in the years to come.

- **Jobs: What's Expanding, What's Declining?**

A straightforward way to capture the essence of what is happening with jobs in the region is to focus on the area's industrial structure. Figure 5 classifies jobs into two major industrial groups – the *goods producing* and *service producing* sectors. The former is comprised of those industries that have been the historical lifeblood of the region's economy, namely agricultural services. The service producing sector encompasses the following industries: wholesale and retail trade; transportation and public utilities; finance, insurance and real estate; services; and government and government enterprises.

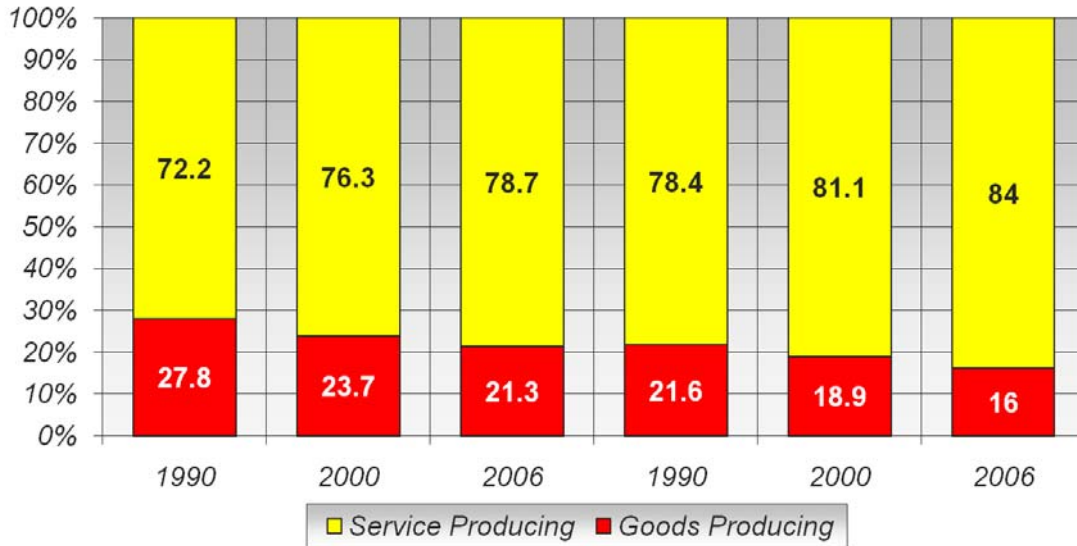
Much like the nation as a whole, the Mid South Delta region has expanded its link to service-producing sector jobs, although rates in the region have been consistently lower than those recorded in the U.S. as a whole. Today's Mid South Delta economy is dominated by service producing sector jobs, a situation that is spurred by the continued erosion of employment in the goods producing sector (from 27.8 percent of all jobs in 1990, to 21.3 percent in 2006).

A different approach to gaining a handle on the economic complexion of the region is to explore the specific types of shifts that have occurred by various occupations. Such an examination provides added insights on the nature of the jobs that are expanding or that are in decline. Table 3 showcases the occupations in the region that have generated at least 700 new jobs over the 2002-07 period. Furthermore, occupations that have experienced declines of 300 jobs or more jobs over this same period of time also are outlined in Table 3.

, agriculture

and manufacturing. Also captured in this sector are such industries as mining,

**Figure 5. The Industrial Structure of the Mid South Delta Region vs. the U.S., 1990-2006**  
*Mid South Delta* *United States*



construction, and

What is striking about the 17 occupations that have created a sizable number of new jobs is that two-thirds of these jobs pay a median hour wage of under \$12, or about \$25,000 a year (assuming these jobs are full time in nature, something this is unlikely to be the case). Jobs linked to higher education, nursing, and major management positions offer relatively higher wages. Only six of the 17 jobs require some type of post-secondary education.

As for occupations that have suffered the largest declines, nearly all are associated with manufacturing or agriculture-related activities. Ten of the 12 occupations facing the greatest job cut-backs between 2002 and 2007 paid a 2007 median hourly wage of under \$12. With few exceptions, jobs lost since 2002 have been replaced with jobs being generated by a different set of occupations, with few of these new positions paying hourly wages that are any higher than those associated with the lost job slots.

**Table 3. Occupations Experiencing the Largest Numerical Increase and Loss in Job Slots, 2002-07**

Occupation	Jobs in 2002	Jobs in 2007	Numerical Change	2007 Median Hourly Earnings	Education Level Required
<b>Largest Number of New Jobs</b>					
Personal and	3,472	5,193	1,721	\$8.34	Short-term on-the-

home care aides					job training
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	10,240	11,459	1,219	\$6.59	Short-term on-the-job training
Carpenters	5,524	6,740	1,216	\$16.12	Long-term on-the-job training
Home health aides	3,097	4,308	1,211	\$8.43	Short-term on-the-job training
Real estate sales agents	3,863	5,011	1,148	\$11.47	Postsecondary vocational award
Real estate brokers	3,627	4,750	1,123	\$11.64	Work experience in a related field
Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food	8,912	10,025	1,113	\$6.47	Short-term on-the-job training
Registered nurses	10,447	11,513	1,066	\$23.39	Associate's degree
Retail salespersons	21,376	22,362	986	\$9.50	Short-term on-the-job training
Nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants	9,839	10,719	880	\$8.37	Postsecondary vocational award
Child care workers	9,107	9,986	879	\$6.34	Short-term on-the-job training
Waiters and waitresses	7,908	8,755	847	\$7.01	Short-term on-the-job training
Postsecondary teachers	4,234	5,032	798	\$31.54	Doctoral degree
Managers, all other	5,390	6,167	777	\$40.45	Work experience in a related field
Door-to-door sales workers, news and street vendors, and related workers	3,322	4,096	774	\$6.21	Short-term on-the-job training
Construction managers	3,011	3,765	754	\$18.01	Bachelor's degree
Property, real estate and community assoc. managers	2,720	3,456	736	\$11.85	Bachelor's degree
<b>Largest Number of Jobs Losses</b>					
Meat, poultry, and fish cutters and trimmers	4,980	3,971	(1,009)	\$10.00	Short-term on-the-job training
Farmers and ranchers	23,300	22,448	(852)	\$6.06	Long-term on-the-job training
Sewing machine operators	2,188	1,376	(812)	\$10.44	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Cashiers, except gaming	22,602	21,876	(726)	\$7.15	Short-term on-the-job training
Stock clerks and order fillers	9,215	8,554	(661)	\$8.26	Short-term on-the-job training
Assemblers and fabricators, all other	2,593	2,172	(421)	\$12.02	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Packers and packagers, hand	4,476	4,071	(405)	\$8.18	Short-term on-the-job training
Slaughterers and meat packers	1,253	888	(365)	\$11.75	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Helpers--Production workers	6,932	6,568	(364)	\$10.67	Short-term on-the-job training
Paper goods machine setters, operators, and tenders	1,603	1,257	(346)	\$16.48	Moderate-term on-the-job training

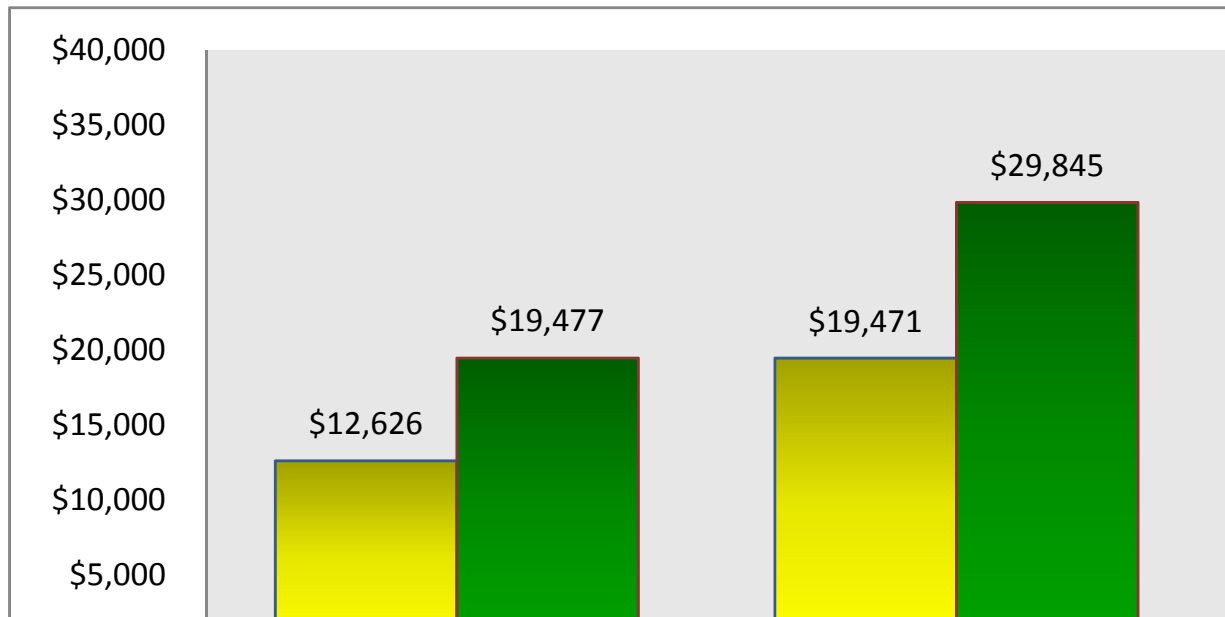
Machine feeders and off bearers	2,250	1,935	(315)	\$11.18	Short-term on-the-job training
Cutting, punching, and press machine setters, operators, and tenders, metal and plastic	2,620	2,317	(303)	\$11.05	Moderate-term on-the-job training

- **A Look at Per Capita Income and Poverty**

An important barometer of the economic health of an area can be captured by the per capita income associated with each person. We highlight the per capita incomes of individuals in the Mid South Delta Region as well as the U.S. population as a whole (see Figure 6). Given the Mid South Region’s level of poverty, it is not surprising to detect a gap between the region and the U.S. on this income measure. While a sizable differential remains, there has been a slow but steady reduction on that gap since 1990. For example, the 1990 per capita income of the region was about 65 percent that of the U.S. rate. Today (i.e., data for 2006), the gap has shrunk slightly, with the region’s per capita income being 68.5 percent of the national figure. Certainly, the income disparities remain serious, but some improvement has been realized.

At the same time, there is another measure that should give reason for pause regarding the economic health of the region – the level of poverty existing in the region’s 58 counties and parishes. According to the Economic Research Service, nearly 64 percent of the region’s counties/parishes (n=37) were classified as high poverty counties in 1990. High poverty counties are defined as counties having a poverty rate of 20 percent or more (Beale, 2004). Over the 2000-06 period, however, the number of high poverty counties and parishes has expanded to 44,

**Figure 6. Per Capita Income of the Mid South Delta Region and U.S. Population, 1990-2006**

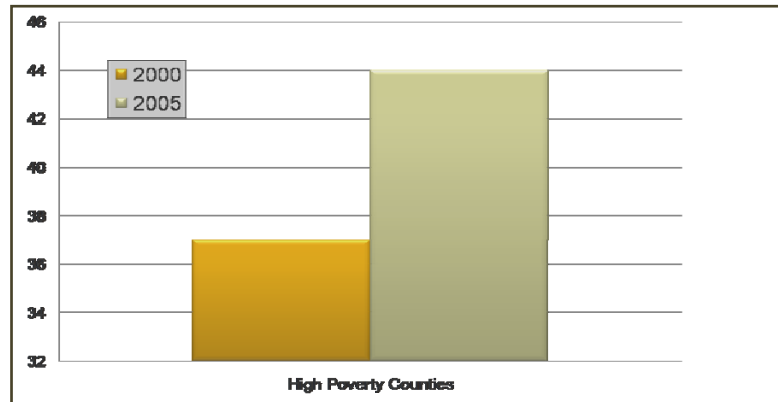


representing nearly 76 percent of all counties in the Mid South Delta region. This suggests that while per capita income has increased in recent years, those in the lowest rungs of the income ladder are not capturing any of these gains, suggesting that things are getting worse for those who are poor, or are living just above the poverty threshold.

**Figure 7. Number of High Poverty Counties in the Mid South Region**

- **Examining the Region's Entrepreneurial Activities**

There is an expanding chorus of people who believe that entrepreneurship can play a central role in spurring the economy of local communities (Drabenstott, 1999; Low et. al 2005; Southern Growth Policies



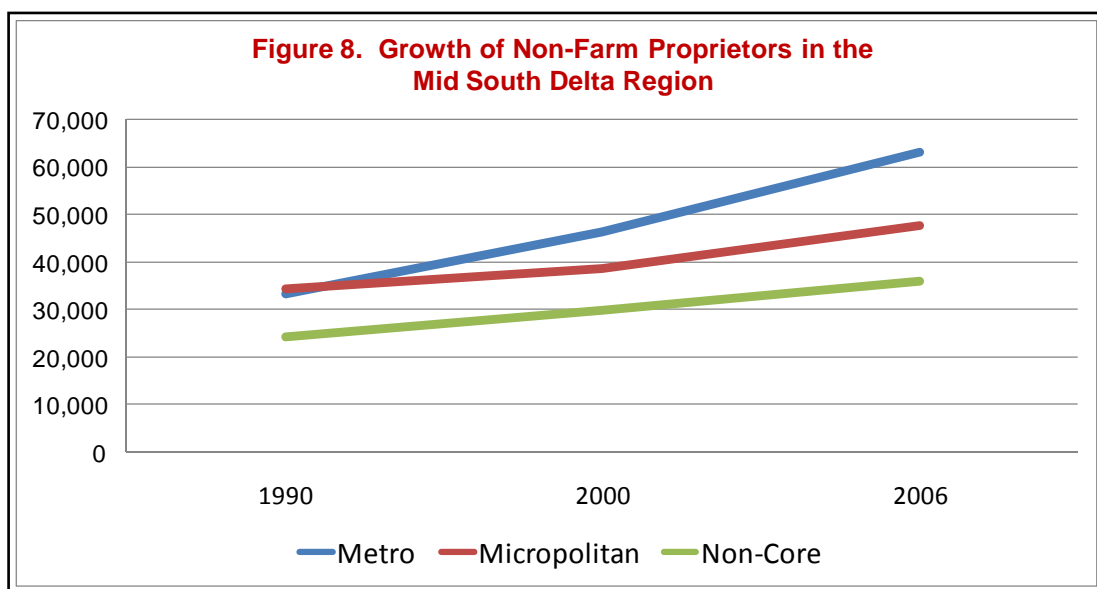
Board, 2005). According to Low et. al (2005:61-62), a strong linkage exists between the growth of entrepreneurship and the long-term economic health of an area. The reasons are that entrepreneurs bring ideas and innovations to the table and help generate new jobs, all of which translates into wealth creation for the local community or region in which these entrepreneurs are embedded.

Goetz (2005) mapped the growth of entrepreneurs in nonmetro areas since the late 1960s. He offered clear evidence that entrepreneurs (which he defines as nonfarm proprietors) have become a larger share of all jobs in rural America, growing from less than 14

percent in 1969 to over 18 percent thirty years later. Similarly, Low and her associates (2005) conclude that rural areas have become the home for a growing number of entrepreneurs. They find that non-core counties are leading the way in terms of the percent of the workforce classified as entrepreneurs.

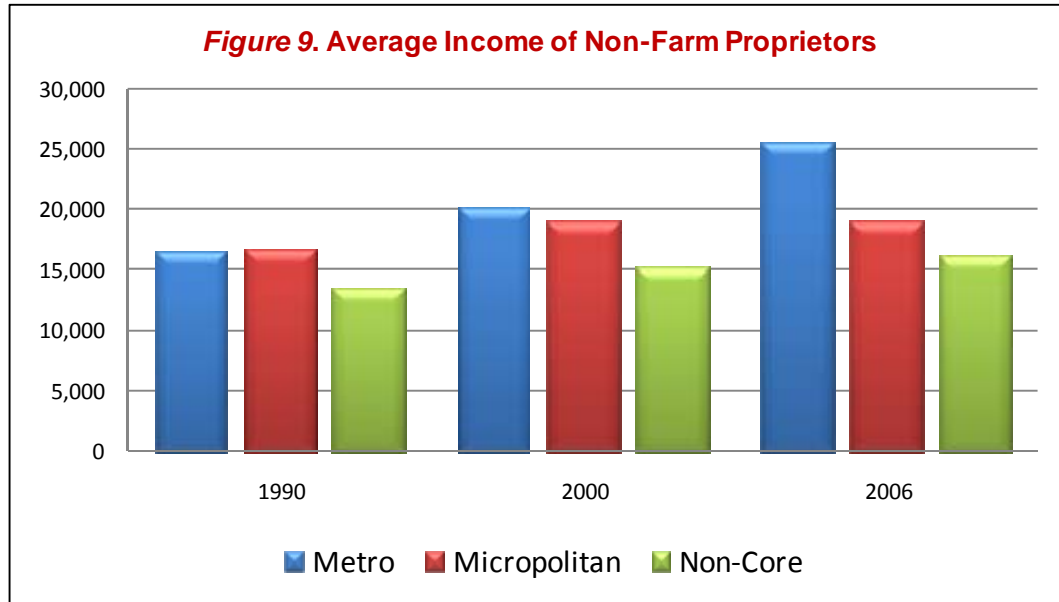
Like Low et. al (2005), we examine the nature of entrepreneurship across metro, micropolitan and non-core counties in the Mid South Delta Region. We adopt the definition of entrepreneurs embraced by Goetz and Low et al. -- persons who are self-employed in nonfarm-related businesses (also referred to as nonfarm proprietors). We examine shifts taking place in entrepreneurial activities across metro/nonmetro areas of the region over the 1990-2006 period and assess how the rate of self-employment differs across metro and nonmetro (i.e., micropolitan and non-core) areas.

The importance of nonfarm proprietors (be they full or part-time) since 1990 is showcased in Figure 8. Overall, self-employment has increased steadily across all three county types over the past 16 years. However, the proportional growth of self-employed workers in the region has been highest in the metro areas of the region (growing by 90 percent between 1990-2006), followed by non-core counties (+ 48.9 percent) and micropolitan areas (+ 39.7 percent). Even though metro areas have seen the largest numerical increase in self-employed individuals over this period of time, self-employment tends to represent a larger share of the employed workforce in non-core counties relative to metro or micropolitan areas. For example, as of 2006, 19.4 percent of the employed work force in the region's non-core counties is self-employed, followed by metro areas at 18.4 percent and micropolitan areas at 15.8 percent of the employed workforce.



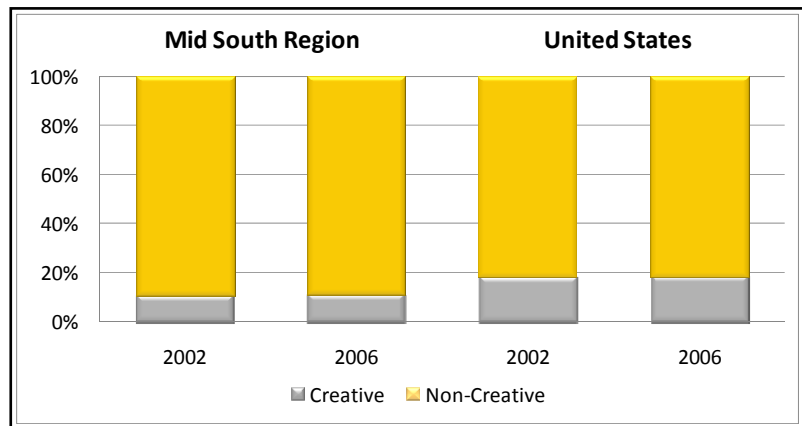
The healthy growth of entrepreneurship does appear to come with a price in micropolitan and non-core nonmetro counties. As Figure 9 reveals, average earnings in nonmetro

areas of the Mid South Delta region – be they micropolitan or non-core counties – have not kept pace with those secured by metro-based non-farm proprietors. Self-employed persons located in the region’s metro areas made -- on average -- nearly \$26,000 annually in 2006. Non-core county-based entrepreneurs, on the other hand, averaged less than \$16,200 -- more than one-third below the earnings of metro proprietors.



- **Is the Knowledge Economy Thriving?**

The ability of communities to compete in a global marketplace increasingly rests on their success in capturing and expanding their knowledge-based workforce (Munnich and Schrock, 2003). Knowledge is defined as an intangible resource that enables individuals to use information, education, and past experiences to create ideas and innovations (Henderson and Abraham, 2005; Metcalfe and Ramlogan, 2005). According to Henderson and Abraham (2005),



knowledge is the key driver of the U.S. economy. As such, **Figure 10. Percent of Workforce Engaged in Creative Jobs** understanding how the Mid South Delta region measures up relative to the remainder of the U.S. in terms of attracting knowledge-based workers is deserving of attention.

According to Henderson and Abraham (2004), knowledge workers as those engaged in “management, business, financial, professional and related occupations,” positions that

require a high level of knowledge in order to complete complicated job-related tasks. In a similar vein, Florida’s (2002) discussion of the “creative class” is closely aligned with the measurement proposed by Henderson and Abraham. The only exception is the inclusion of “high-end sales and sales management” workers in Florida’s measure of the “creative class.” Recent articles by McGranahan and Wojan (2007a; 2007b) introduce some important refinements to the creative class measure offered by Florida (2002). For this section of our report, we adopt the refined measures of the creative class developed by McGranahan and Wojan (2007a).

Figure 10 shows that about 11 percent of the work force in the Mid South Delta Region was engaged in knowledge/creative work in both 2002 and 2006. For the U.S., the number was approximately 18 percent. The number of knowledge/creative jobs was nearly 78,000 in the region, growing by 4.9 percent since 2002. This pace of growth fell short of the rate recorded across the U.S., which realized a 7.5 percent expansion of its knowledge/creative between 2002 and 2006. These results suggest that the region will struggle in its capacity to expand the knowledge/creative component of its workforce unless it is positioned to invest in amenities that will prove attractive these types of workers to the area. We will address this point in our final section of this report.

- **Jobs in the Next Decade: Opportunities Ahead for the Region?**

If projections are correct, the Mid South Delta Region is expected to create several thousands of jobs over the 2007-2018 period and Table 4 highlights the 20 occupations that are expected to account for more than 49,000 new job slots in the coming decade. As a general statement, these

**Table 4. Top 20 Occupations in Terms of Job Growth, 2007-2018**

Occupation	Jobs in 2007	Jobs in 2018	Numerical Change	2007 Median Hourly Earnings	Education Level Required
Retail salespersons	22,362	26,626	4,264	\$9.50	Short-term on-the-job training
Registered nurses	11,513	14,958	3,445	\$23.39	Associate's degree
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	11,459	14,848	3,389	\$6.59	Short-term on-the-job training
Child care workers	9,986	12,914	2,928	\$6.34	Short-term on-the-job training
Personal and home care aides	5,193	8,116	2,923	\$8.34	Short-term on-the-job training
Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food	10,025	12,766	2,741	\$6.47	Short-term on-the-job training
Nursing aides, orderlies, and attendants	10,719	13,326	2,607	\$8.37	Postsecondary vocational award
Truck drivers, heavy and tractor-trailer	14,747	17,267	2,520	\$14.04	Moderate-term on-the-job training



Home health aides	4,308	6,690	2,382	\$8.43	Short-term on-the-job training
First-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers	13,386	15,613	2,227	\$17.07	Work experience in a related field
Customer service representatives	5,723	7,822	2,099	\$11.47	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Office clerks, general	12,636	14,649	2,013	\$8.36	Short-term on-the-job training
Real estate sales agents	5,011	6,957	1,946	\$11.47	Postsecondary vocational award
Real estate brokers	4,750	6,667	1,917	\$11.64	Work experience in a related field
Elementary school teachers, except special education	10,793	12,694	1,901	\$23.61	Bachelor's degree
Team assemblers	9,087	10,985	1,898	\$11.03	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping cleaners	10,536	12,278	1,742	\$7.58	Short-term on-the-job training
Bookkeeping, accounting, and auditing clerks	11,245	12,939	1,694	\$12.04	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Helpers--Production workers	6,568	8,112	1,544	\$10.67	Short-term on-the-job training
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	15,743	17,232	1,489	\$8.81	Short-term on-the-job training

new positions are likely to be located in the retail trade area (such as retail and food establishments), the health care sector, child care assistance, home/business support services (i.e., housekeeping, janitors/cleaners, customer service, bookkeeping, and real estate services), the trucking industry, the elementary school system, and in production-related activities. Surprisingly, only four of the top 20 occupations (in terms of job growth) will require any formal post-secondary education. Most will require some type of short-to-moderate levels of on-the-job training. Moreover, only four are expected to pay median wages above the \$12 mark. This suggests that most jobs being generated over the next decade will be low-to-moderate paying jobs – wages that are not likely to help the region make substantive progress in reducing poverty and enhancing the distribution of wealth among all people of the region. As such, a conscientious effort will have to be made to invest in innovative strategies to improve the social and economic health of the region in the years ahead. It is to this critical issue that we now turn.

### *Scenarios Ahead: Some Possibilities*

This report has been designed to offer a brief overview of the potential that exists to improve the social and economic conditions in the Mid South Delta region. While recognizing the historical factors that have divided this region by race, class, and geographic location, we have attempted to devote attention to the current and emerging socioeconomic forces at play in the Delta. From our perspective, these shifting socioeconomic dynamics are important to keep in mind when seeking to define the type

of alternative strategies that make sense for promoting economic opportunities in rural, low-wealth places in the region.

Our report suggests that the traditional drivers of the region's economy, such as large-scale manufacturing and corporate farming, remain important to the region, but the number of persons who are employed in these two sectors continues to decline. At the same time, self employment – be it small-scale farming or nonfarm proprietorships – is an expanding fabric of the region's economy. So too are small businesses employing 5-19 persons. These types of enterprises are significant to the area because they build on assets that are already in place (that is, the talent and ingenuity of local people and organizations, the cultural heritage of the region, and the wise use of the area's environmental and natural resource amenities). The vitality of many counties and parishes depends on their ability to tap, nurture, and invest in the entrepreneurial opportunities too often overlooked in the region. It is this inward focus that offers a roadmap for tackling some of the region's most entrenched social, economic, and environmental challenges.

A case in point is the continued persistence of high poverty counties/parishes in the Mid South Delta region. Three of every four counties/parishes in the region are now classified as “high poverty” areas. As Blanchard and Lyson (2006) note, these counties/parishes typically represent food deserts – places where residents have limited access to low-cost, high quality foods. What they depend on are convenience stores that offer a limited range of products, many of questionable nutritional quality. As such, a high number of people and places in food desert areas suffer from a variety of health problems, including high rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

The current work of the National Rural Funders Collaborative in the “local food and culture” economy is the type of investment that makes sense in this region. In our view, this effort is crucial on at least five fronts:

1. It focuses attention on the individual and cultural assets that already are embedded in the region.
2. It supports the growth and expansion of the entrepreneurial capacity of the region – that aspect of the economy that offers the best hope for spurring job growth in the Mid South Delta area over time.
3. It taps the ingenuity of organizations and institutions to help strengthen and sustain small-scale farmers and non-farm enterprises. For example, “marketumbrella.org” and the “Mississippi Association of Cooperatives” are working to improve the earnings of these valuable farm-related enterprises by strengthening and expanding local, regional and national markets (such as public

- markets; sales to schools, local governments, restaurants, and hospitals; and e-commerce activities).
4. It creates a network of local organizations and higher education institutions that are working side-by-side with food and fish growers to offer the breadth of educational programs and technical assistance activities these growers indicate they need to remain viable over the long-term.
  5. It expands local access to fresh and healthy foods, tackling the problem of “food deserts” and promoting improved diets and nutritional intake by residents living in high poverty urban and rural places in the region.

As the NRFC looks ahead to additional strategies for advancing opportunities in the Mid South Delta, we offer the following additional ideas for its consideration and deliberation:

- **Seed and Strengthen Entrepreneurial Activities:** Be it by design or necessity, the number of self-employed persons in the region is continuing to expand. Nearly 1 in 5 persons living in the most rural areas of the Mid South Delta are now proprietors, many being women and/or African Americans. These constitute important economic resources to the area and as such, providing a comprehensive system of support to these individuals is vital. The NRFC can help build a seamless system of support that builds on the business and educational assets of the region (i.e., local schools, community colleges, land-grant universities, small business development centers, SCORE, faith-based groups, etc.). Certainly, the creation of community development financial institutions such as the Hope Community Credit Union is part of the constellation of strategies that is needed to translate the innovations and ideas of local people into viable economic activities.
- **Invest in Youth:** The outflow of youth from the Mid South Delta Region poses a major challenge for the region. Finding ways to engage youth in the future of the community is crucial. Building entrepreneurship into the public school curriculum and expanding civic engagement of youth in community deliberations and actions constitute key avenues for strengthening the ties of young people to their communities, ties that may stem the permanent loss of these young individuals to other communities outside the region.
- **Build on the Cultural Assets of the Community:** Rural areas across the country – including areas with a history of poverty and economic instability – are opening their eyes to the creative skills that are in their midst already. The rich history of music, art, literature, culture, and legacy that are part of the fabric of this region are important assets that can translate into economic possibilities. While efforts

to tap these assets have been launched in various communities in the Delta, pursuing the development of strong regional partnerships among communities and organizations is crucial to the promotion of the Delta as a major historical and cultural magnet in the U.S. *HandMade in America* is a prime example of the economic boost that can come to a region (i.e., Western North Carolina area) through regional collaboration, education, and a commitment to supporting the talents of local people and the rich heritage of the area. It is this type of structure that can serve as a viable model for the Mid South Delta Region.

- **Invest in Workforce Skills:** The lion's share of new jobs being projected for the region through 2018 will require only modest levels of on-the-job training. On the other hand, some jobs paying good wages/salaries will require workers with specialized and technical training (i.e., truckers, retail supervisors, customer service representatives, accounting/bookkeeping clerks). By working in tandem with Workforce Investment Centers and community colleges in the area, communities can enhance the pool of skilled workers needed to fill these expanding positions in the region.
- **Add Value to the Important Sectors of the Economy:** Data presented in this report provide a preview of the type of occupations that are expected to grow in the next decade. Giving careful study to the sectors that are likely to expand, and deliberating on the type of value-added activities that can be pursued to complement these new jobs, can be a worthwhile venture.
- **Build on the Demographic Realities of the Region Shifts:** The demographic changes that have taken place in the Mid South Delta Region suggest that the population is aging and diversifying in terms of racial/ethnic composition. Worthy of attention are the special niche activities that can be launched to respond to the new services or products needed by these various population groups.
- **Foster Civic Engagement:** Given the long history of division on the basis of race, class, and power in the Delta, social and economic progress in the region cannot be achieved without a strong commitment to building bridges among all people of the region. The future of the Mid South Delta Region rests on the capacity of people and communities to come together to create and act on future opportunities and challenges. Finding a mechanism to build trust, to deliberate on issues, and to act on priorities for advancing the collective good of all people and communities, is crucial. Models of civic engagement – such as those advanced by Everyday Democracy, National Issues Forum, and Northwest Area Foundation Horizons Project – are worthy of careful consideration by the NRFC (especially

given the promising efforts these organizations have undertaken in high poverty communities and in places with a long history of racial/ethnic discord).

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