



Blueprint for the Rural South

DISCOVERING NEW IDEAS |
APPLYING NEW STRATEGIES



A FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE
SOUTHERN RURAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER



FOSTERING CIVIC-MINDED COMMUNITIES

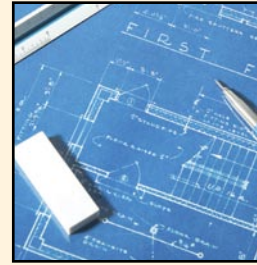
BUILDING ECONOMICALLY VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES IN DISTRESSED AND LOW-WEALTH COMMUNITIES

*Number of Roundtable
Participants by State:*

Alabama.....	55
Arkansas.....	46
Florida.....	58
Georgia.....	35
Kentucky.....	58
Louisiana.....	44
Mississippi.....	10
North Carolina.....	30
Oklahoma.....	52
South Carolina.....	29
Tennessee.....	51
Texas.....	21
Virginia.....	21
West Virginia.....	75
Total.....	585

The map below shows the locations of the state rural development roundtables. The full set of state roundtable proceedings is available on the SRDC Web site: <http://srdc.msstate.edu/sp/06staterdroundtables.htm>



Doing the Right Things the Right Way

The South is a region of amazing contrasts. It is an area whose economic health has been bolstered by the presence of leading international firms, but whose rural landscape remains dotted with scores of empty buildings that are daily reminders of the movement of jobs to offshore destinations. It is an area that continues to lead the nation in attracting new people of diverse backgrounds to its communities, but whose rural localities cannot seem to shake their history of losing talented adults and youth to urban and suburban destinations. It is a region with access to cutting-edge information technologies, but an area where broadband services are a distant dream for many rural people and places. It is a region with world-class health care professionals and facilities, yet an area where health care is unaffordable or unavailable to countless middle income and low-wealth residents living in the rural South. It is an area with superb school systems, colleges and universities, but a region suffering from the highest rates of high school dropouts and the lowest educational attainment levels among its adults. It is a region with a vast array of productive farmland and attractive natural resources, but an area that faces immense development pressures that are jeopardizing the long-term sustainability of these precious resources. The list goes on and on.

Highlighting the litany of problems facing the South is not what this document is all about. Rather, it is an effort to showcase the pressing issues that are in the hearts and minds of Southerners and the work that the SRDC and its land-grant partners have in store as they strive to respond to these challenges. It is a plan that calls for all of us – the SRDC, the region’s 29 land-grant schools, rural development partners, local residents and community groups – to work in tandem in discovering new ideas and applying innovative strategies to address these key issues. It is about doing the right things in the right way for the right reasons.

SPECIAL THANKS TO THE KELLOGG FOUNDATION

The series of 19 roundtable sessions held across the South would not have been possible without the financial support provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Sincere appreciation is extended to Rick Foster and Caroline Carpenter, both with the Kellogg Foundation, for guiding the Southern Rural Development Center in its quest to create a strategic plan that builds on the wisdom of local people in the region. The Center also thanks the Foundation for defraying the major expenses associated with the preparation and publication of this important strategic blueprint for the rural South.

Figure 1. Top Priorities Identified by Individuals Participating in Each State Rural Development Roundtable Held in the Southern Region

MAJOR THEMES	STATES IN THE SOUTHERN REGION													
	AL	AR	GA	FL	KY	LA	MS	NC	OK	SC	TN	TX	VA	WV*
Disaster Management														
Economic/Sustainable Development		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Education/Workforce Development	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
Financial Capital Resources														
Health and Nutrition														
Housing														
Information and Communication Technologies	•				•									•
Leadership and Citizen Participation	•	•	•		•		•	•		•	•	•	•	
Natural Resources and Environmental Management				•	•	•		•						
Population Change, Migration Patterns														
Poverty, Inequality								•						
Public Services/Public Infrastructure	•								•			•		
Rural/Urban Interface, Growth Management														

*West Virginia is not technically a part of the SRDC Region. However, its 1890 institution, West Virginia State University, works largely with its sister 1890 schools in the South. Therefore, WVSVU was invited to host a rural development roundtable.



Gathering the Insights of Stakeholders in the South

With critical financial support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the SRDC launched a systematic effort to hear from the people of the South. An important first step was the initiation of an information-gathering phase that started in May 2006 and continued over a six-month period. With seed funding provided by the Kellogg Foundation, land-grant university teams responded to the SRDC’s call to host state-based rural development roundtables. In all, 19 sessions were successfully conducted across 14 Southern states (see map on inside cover). A diversity of voices engaged in these roundtables, including representatives from education, government, business/economic development, social services, civic, philanthropic, family/youth and faith-based sectors.

Nearly 600 people shared their perspectives on the most significant rural development issues impacting their states – issues they felt deserved serious attention by the region’s 29 land-grant universities. These included ideas on the research, technical assistance and outreach education efforts that these institutions should address over the next five years.

Figure 1 outlines the entire list of rural development themes that roundtable participants were asked to consider in their efforts to delineate the highest set of rural development priorities in their states. Of the 13 thematic topics examined in each state, three issues emerged time and time again as being of critical importance to the well-being of rural people and communities. These key elements were:

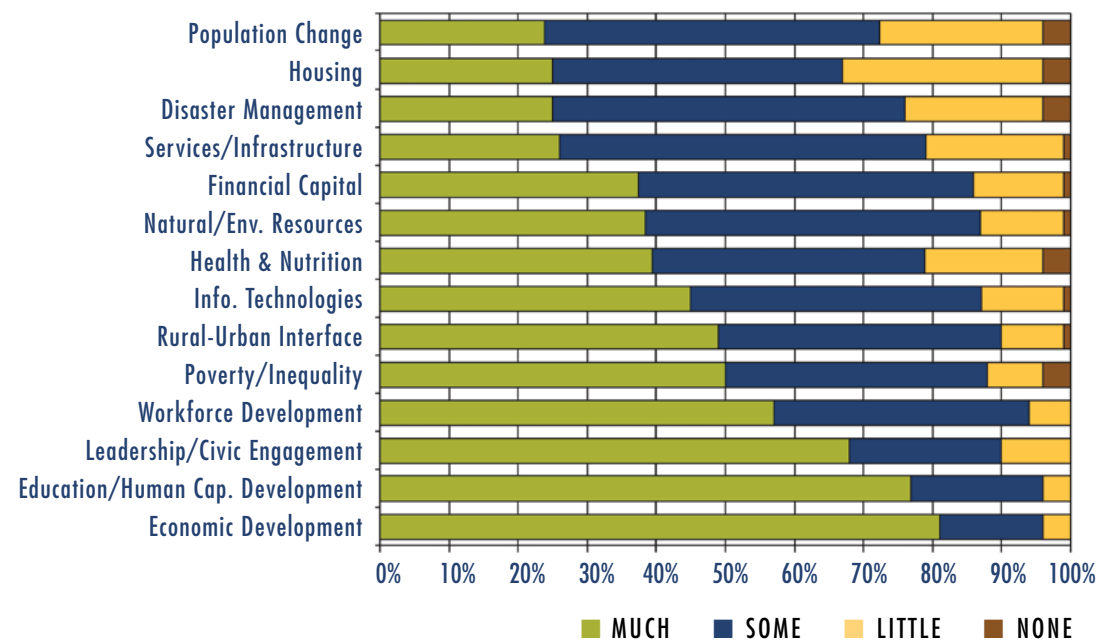
- **EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT** (selected in 13 states)
- **ECONOMIC/SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT** (selected in 12 states)
- **LEADERSHIP AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION** (selected in 10 states)

Land-Grant Faculty Weigh in on Rural Development Priorities

To complement the state roundtables, the SRDC developed a Web-based survey that was distributed to research and Extension faculty and staff in the region. The survey sought their input regarding the top rural development priorities in the South, their assessment of the current work of the Center and their recommendations as to the direction the SRDC should take as part of its new strategic blueprint. A total of 139 individuals responded to the survey.

Figure 2 showcases the amount of attention that faculty and staff felt the SRDC and Southern land-grant schools should devote to the 13 rural development topics they were asked to rate. Participants were offered four options: Much Attention, Some Attention, Little Attention or No Attention. As Figure 2 indicates, three topics garnered the majority of support of land-grant faculty, while four others captured moderate support by a sizable number of these individuals.

Figure 2. Amount of Attention that Should be Devoted to Key Rural Development Issues from the Perspective of Land-Grant Faculty and Staff



The Next Step: Synthesizing Multiple Inputs

The valuable information generated from state roundtable session participants, coupled with the results captured in the survey of land-grant university faculty and staff, required in-depth analysis and debate. One step the SRDC took was to organize and host a synthesis meeting in Atlanta, Ga., in October 2006. The meeting involved several of the land-grant faculty who coordinated rural development roundtables in their states. Key representatives from outside the land-grant system also were actively involved in this one-day meeting. In all, 25 individuals participated in what became known as the “Southern Region Rural Development Roundtable.” What emerged from this important meeting was a working draft of the SRDC’s new strategic priorities.

The working draft outlined as a result of the regional roundtable was subsequently submitted to the Center’s Technical and Operational Advisory Committee (TOAC), the faculty-driven committee that is charged with the responsibility of giving input and guidance to the Center regarding its programmatic activities. TOAC spent an entire day reviewing the proposed priorities, examining how well those priorities aligned with the role of the SRDC or its land-grant partners, and determining whether the Center had the human and fiscal resources to tackle the entire span of strategic priorities. In the end, three central themes were embraced as the core elements of the Center’s work over the next five years. These new proposed priorities were submitted to the Center’s Board of Directors for approval. The SRDC Board provided formal endorsement of the Center’s new strategic priorities at its November 2006 annual meeting.

Discovering New Ideas, Applying New Strategies

Involving so many individuals in the creation of our new strategic plan was necessary to ensure that the Center had extensive buy-in from key parties with whom it works. Now the SRDC earnestly begins the hard work of getting the plan off the ground. Without question, the success of our new blueprint will be linked to the level of investment that the region’s land-grant universities are likely to dedicate to the strategic priorities outlined in this document. It will be essential for land-grant faculty to conduct applied research that can unleash new ideas for promoting sound community and economic development efforts in the rural South. It will also be essential for Extension educators to reach out to local people with new strategies for building a brighter future for their communities.



Joining hands with its land-grant university colleagues and key rural development partners, the SRDC is pleased to outline its new strategic blueprint – a blueprint that honors the people’s rural development agenda. It encompasses three key priorities, each of which are described in the next section of this report.

Priority 1

Fostering Civic-Minded Communities

Many Southerners rarely feel a sense of ownership for what takes place in their communities. Family and work demands, community problems with no easy solutions, uncertainty on how get their voices heard, citizen apathy or alienation, entrenched leaders that oppose change – all are factors that tear away at the civic health of a community. Reviving and expanding the civic activeness of local people, institutions and organizations is a critical prerequisite for gaining traction and support for the tough choices that rural communities must make today. What the people of the rural South want are innovative ways to get involved, to share their insights and to make a difference.

In the next few years, the SRDC will be working with land-grant faculty and key partners to launch efforts that will strengthen and facilitate people's engagement in the lives of their communities. An important companion piece will be research that uncovers key factors contributing to, or inhibiting, the emergence of civically active communities.

Core activities will be focused on the following topics:

- **EXPANDING ENGAGEMENT THROUGH PUBLIC DELIBERATION AND ACTION:** Offer an important process for local people, organizations and groups to deliberate on important local issues, make choices together on how best to move forward in tackling these issues, and take action based on reasoned public judgment. The focus is on making citizen-centered approaches a core ingredient in building civic-minded communities.
- **BUILDING LEADERSHIP-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES:** Pursue strategies for expanding the breadth of local leaders by ensuring that a cross-section of local people are accorded leadership building opportunities, and work to create a positive, receptive environment for new leaders in these communities.
- **BRINGING GOVERNMENT TO THE PEOPLE THROUGH E-GOVERNMENT:** Explore innovative ways to expand citizen participation and engagement in local public policy discussions through the use of information technologies such as e-government and e-democracy. Explore how these powerful mechanisms might build stronger democracies and communities.





Priority 2

Building Economically Vibrant Communities

There is little doubt in the minds of local residents and leaders that the economic complexion of the rural South is changing. While agriculture and manufacturing remain vital parts of the economic health of many rural places, domestic and global forces are bringing dramatic changes to these sectors. Agriculture is becoming leaner and more efficient, while low-skilled manufacturing jobs are on the decline. Though rural places are experiencing healthy job growth, most are service-producing jobs that tend to pay lower wages and offer limited benefits.

So the question on the minds of rural Southerners is this: What economic development strategies make sense for rural communities of the South today? The question is critical and calls for the development of an economic development portfolio that is realistic and balanced. Such a portfolio not only acknowledges the value of recruiting firms that are a good fit for the community, but also recognizes the importance of looking internally. This means helping find ways to make existing firms stronger and unlocking the innovative entrepreneurial spirit that exists among adults and youth in these communities.

In the next several months, the SRDC will be working with its rural development partners (land-grant and non land-grant) on the following efforts designed to explore important avenues for building vibrant rural economies:

- **BUILDING ENTREPRENEURIAL-FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES:** Pursue a variety of activities to find the mix of strategies that can help rural communities seed future entrepreneurs, including building the skills of current and emerging entrepreneurs and enhancing community awareness and support for entrepreneurial activities.
- **STRENGTHENING EXISTING FIRMS THROUGH BUSINESS RETENTION AND EXPANSION:** Implement programs that help assist, nurture and support business enterprises already existing in the community.
- **ADVANCING E-COMMERCE STRATEGIES FOR SMALL BUSINESSES:** Focus on efforts to help accelerate the adoption of e-commerce strategies by small businesses, micro enterprises and entrepreneurs.
- **EXPANDING AGRICULTURE/COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS:** Blend sustainable agriculture practices with new community development strategies that serve to increase and build resilient farms, businesses and communities. Furthermore, invest in the application of innovative new tools to support sustainable community development activities.



Enhancing Opportunities in Distressed and Low-Wealth Communities

Priority 3

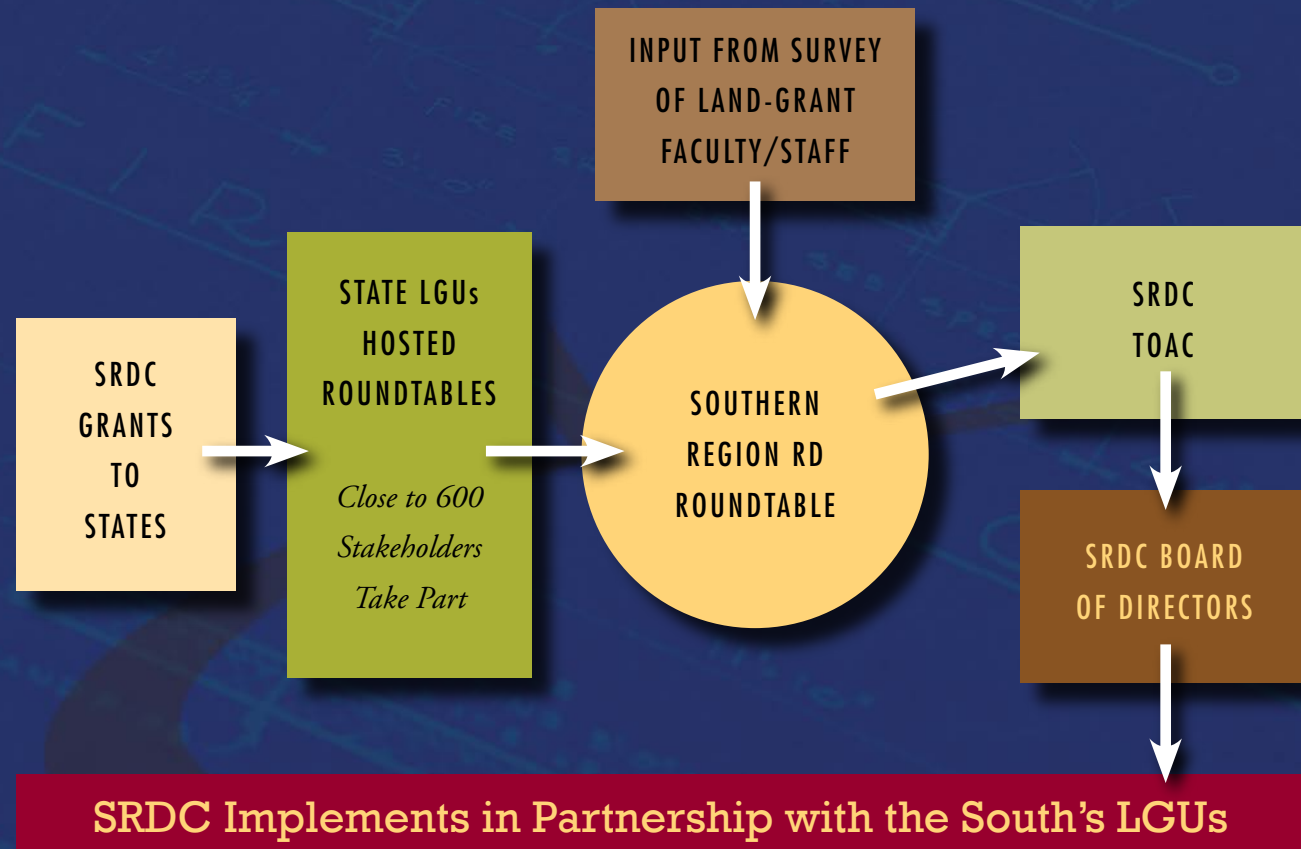
It is a well-known fact that most of our nation's persistently high poverty counties are located in the rural South. The economic, educational, social, historical and cultural challenges faced by local residents in these geographic areas are pervasive. Our land-grant system must accelerate its efforts to better understand and address these issues through appropriate mechanisms and strategies.

In addition to a concerted focus on low-wealth areas of the South, the SRDC and its land-grant partners must work to advance the capacity of rural communities to respond effectively and efficiently to episodes of major distress. Such distress may be the result of changes sparked by the closure of a major industry, the influx of sizable numbers of new residents or major natural or man-made disasters.

As such, the SRDC/Southern land-grant university team will focus their efforts on the following over the next several months:

- **ADDRESSING THE FOOD ASSISTANCE/NUTRITION CHALLENGES OF VULNERABLE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES IN THE RURAL SOUTH:** Invest in research designed to address the host of food assistance-related issues that affect the region's vulnerable populations and communities, including the persistently poor, children/youth, families headed by single parents, the elderly and racial/ethnic minorities. Furthermore, seek to understand the unique challenges facing individuals and families embedded in nonmetropolitan counties, rural places or low-wealth areas of the South.
- **EXPANDING DECISION-MAKING TOOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR THE MID SOUTH DELTA REGION:** Provide individuals with ready access to a variety of economic, demographic and social indicators that citizens, local leaders and organizations are likely to find quite valuable as they work to better understand and respond to important shifts taking place in their areas.
- **STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO THE NEW HISPANIC SOUTH:** Mobilize land-grant faculty to work collaboratively to better understand the challenges and opportunities associated with the current and future growth of Hispanics in the rural South; strengthen the research and Extension outreach work being undertaken by our region's land-grant university system that addresses the growth of Hispanics in the South; and advance the capacity of the land-grant system to lend support to those rural communities that seek to respond to the needs of their growing Hispanic population in a positive and strategic manner.
- **ENHANCING COMMUNITY CAPACITY FOR LONG-TERM REBUILDING AFTER DISASTERS:** Assist in designing and implementing a comprehensive rural development strategy that can help revitalize rural areas that have been impacted by major natural disasters (such as hurricanes) or economic disasters. The focus is on planting the seeds to guide the long-term rebuilding strategies in these localities.

Figure 3. Steps Employed in Building the New SRDC Strategic Plan



Staying True to Our Mission and Goals

As the SRDC launches its new blueprint for the rural South, it will remain true to its goals and mission – to advance the ability of the region’s 29 land-grant institutions to address the critical set of contemporary rural development issues in the region. Making these new ideas and strategies a reality will require high-quality research from our region’s talented pool of land-grant university social scientists. The challenge of putting these new strategies into practice also relies on Extension educators from across all program areas who have a strong commitment to offering rural people and communities the best available information and educational resources for guiding their community improvement.

The task of helping provide the essential resources to get the job done will rest with our CSREES/USDA partner, our 29 land-grant universities and our rural development partners in the philanthropic, governmental and non-governmental sectors. In the final analysis, the success of the SRDC’s strategic plan will be dependent upon how well the region’s land-grant university system has responded to the challenges that our stakeholders have placed before us. We must work together to make the rural people and communities of the South proud of our work.

MISSION

The Southern Rural Development Center seeks to strengthen the capacity of the region’s 29 land-grant institutions to address critical contemporary rural development issues impacting the well-being of people and communities in the rural South.

SRDC GOALS

- Stimulate the formation of multi-state research teams
- Coordinate the development and revision of educational materials and maintain a centralized repository of educational resources
- Organize and deliver high priority rural development research and educational workshops/conferences
- Provide leadership for the preparation of science-based rural development policy reports
- Build partnerships that link the South’s land-grant university system with other key entities committed to rural development activities in the region

PREPARED BY:

Lionel J. (Bo) Beaulieu, *Southern Rural Development Center*

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE STATE RURAL DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLE COORDINATORS:

Alan Barefield, *Mississippi State University*

James Barnes, *Louisiana State University*

Gae Broadwater, *Kentucky State University*

Hank Cothran, *University of Florida*

Albert Essel, *Virginia State University*

Lori Garkovich, *University of Kentucky*

Ed Jones, *North Carolina State University*

Dave Lamie, *Clemson University*

John McKissick, *University of Georgia*

Tammy Seefeld, *University of Arkansas*

George Smith, *University of Tennessee*

Joe Sumners, *Auburn University*

Greg Taylor, *Texas A&M University*

Crystal Tyler-Mackey, *Virginia Tech*

Louis Whitesides, *South Carolina State University*

Michael Wilcox, *University of Tennessee*

Mike Woods, *Oklahoma State University*



SOUTHERN RURAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER, BOX 9656, 410 BOST EXTENSION CENTER
MISSISSIPPI STATE, MS 39762, PHONE: 662-325-3207, FAX: 662-325-8915
PUBLICATIONS@SRDC.MSSTATE.EDU, HTTP://SRDC.MSSTATE.EDU, SRDC SERIES #239

July 2007