

Turning the Tide on Poverty Extension Initiative:
Helping Communities in the Rural South Tackle Poverty
Using Deliberative Democracy Strategies

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Phase One: Final Report
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As *Turning the Tide on Poverty Extension Initiative* nears the end of its Phase One time period, the Southern Rural Development Center is pleased to report high levels of community participation and interest. Six of the eight pilot communities have already moved into their community action phase, which is where the ideas generated during the Study Circles process get “legs and feet” to move the community forward. Below is an update of what has happened to date in this initiative, continuing to follow the outline presented in the original proposal to the Farm Foundation.

Phase One Deliverables Promised:

- 1. Adapt the “*Thriving Communities: From Poverty to Prosperity*” resources for use by Land-grant Extension educators in the South. – Complete in second quarter**

The newly revised document, titled *Turning the Tide on Poverty: Creating Vibrant Communities Together*, has been printed and has been distributed to trainers across the five states. An electronic copy of the document can be accessed on our website at: http://srdc.msstate.edu/tide/meetings/srdc_tide.pdf

- 2. Select *Turning the Tide on Poverty* sites in the four target states. – Complete in first quarter.** (Note that two of the original target states selected only one county each, but a third state – Mississippi – was added to reach the target eight sites.)

The following is the list of states and the county/counties selected within each of these states to take part in this initiative:

- Alabama: Perry and Dallas Counties
- Georgia: Elbert County
- Louisiana: St. Landry and Tensas Parishes
- Mississippi: Neshoba and Lauderdale Counties
- Oklahoma: Okfuskee County

- 3. Recruit core planning teams from each pilot site. – Complete in first quarter.**

Each pilot site was presented with the task of recruiting an 8-12 member core planning team that represented the diversity of the community. Local community coaches, drawn from the county/parish Extension Service, were instrumental in identifying these key community contacts.

4. Organize interactive video training sessions with Extension Educators and community core planning teams from the eight sites – Complete in third quarter

Four training events have been completed, three of which were conducted via interactive video while the fourth one was done as a face-to-face meeting on December 16-17. The dates and topics covered as part of these four sessions are outlined below:

- a. August 2, 2009: The session explored (1) the key characteristics of poverty in the South; (2) success stories from the Northwest Region’s Horizons project; (3) how a study circle works through a mock session; and (4) how to begin organizing for a community-wide study circle process.
- b. October 2, 2009: Dealing with the Issue of Race Relations in Community Study Circles
- c. December 16-17, 2009: How to Train Volunteers to Facilitate Community Study Circles; Finalizing Kick–Off plans
- d. February 12, 2010: How to Prepare for and Moderate a Community Action Forum

5. Launch the *Turning the Tide on Poverty Study Circles Program*

At the end of this first year funding cycle, we will be only days away from launching the last Study Circle site. Though a bit behind the intended timeline, the Core Planning Team of St. Landry Parish, LA is making amazing strides and is very enthusiastic about this community process. Focusing on all pilot sites as a whole, nearly 100 volunteer facilitators have been trained to date to coordinate the work of over 30 Study Circles. The Study Circles have engaged over 250 community members in a five week deliberative dialogue process. With all but two sites having completed their Action Forums, meaningful community-based initiatives are beginning to take shape. These will be discussed in more detail in a latter section of this report. The table below showcases key information on each of the pilot sites with regard to when they held their kick-off date for the Turning the Tide on Poverty program, how many facilitators that trained, the number of study circles that were organized in their sites, and the date of their Action Forum.

Pilot Site	Kick Off Date	Facilitators	Study Circles	Action Forum
Dallas Co. (AL)	March 30	4	2	May 10
Perry Co. (AL)	March 30	3	2	May 11
Elbert Co. (GA)	April 15	6	3	July

St. Landry Parish (LA)	June 12	9	5*	July 19
Tensas Parish (LA)	Jan. 26	8	1	March 23
Lauderdale Co. (MS)	Feb. 4	16	4	April 15
Neshoba Co. (MS)	Feb. 18	40	11	March 30
Okfuskee Co. (OK)	Jan. 18	10	4	March 23

*Anticipated

Additional Phase One Successes Reported in the Third Quarter:

In addition to the completion of key steps that were outlined in our original Farm Foundation proposal (and discussed above), the SRDC team realized other project strengthening accomplishments since the launch of this effort:

1. Establishment of a Project Website to Promote the Initiative: Check out the important information that has been assembled at this site:
<http://srdc.msstate.edu/tide/>
2. Development of a Several Templates for Recruiting and Promoting the Initiative: These are resources that can be used and adapted to other regions. They include a PowerPoint presentation, news release templates for various points along the process, one page fact sheets that can be used with community members and community organizations, and tailored invitation letters designed to generate support among key organizations and individuals within the community.
3. Creation of a Process to Gauge Community Change among Participants and Communities: Document the value and impact of this program is critical. As such, we have developed pre/post survey, a protocol for interviewing key informants and focus group members in the target communities, and reporting templates for the purpose of capturing detailed information on the action steps that each pilot site has undertaken as a result of the Study Circles process.

Early Stages of Community Change:

Despite the fact that the Action Teams that have been part of the Turning the Tide on Poverty initiative have only been working in the pilot sites for a short period of time, we are already noticing that some significant activities have been launched. While it is difficult to capture all of the enthusiasm that has been generated in the pilot

communities, we will attempt to showcase some of the promising directions and early “wins” that are demonstrative of the communities’ energy and zeal. We provide highlights below by each of the pilot sites based upon the dates in which their Action Forums were completed. By so doing, we hope to offer the Farm Foundation a better sense of how time has had an important impact on the level of progress our sites have realized to date. Certainly, those sites that were the first to complete their Action Forums have had more time to move their plans into action.

Okfuskee County, Oklahoma (March 23):

Action Teams

- *Mentoring Children & Youth Action Team* is currently researching possible models for the design of their program, looking at best practices.
- *Economic Development Action Team* has participated in a grant writing workshop.
- *Clearview Community Action Team* has started a community garden.
- *Empowering and Educating to Break the Cycle of Poverty Action Team* is planning to conduct a series of workshops using a poverty simulation exercise. Their aim is to educate youth and the general public on the challenges faced through a life of poverty.

Early Challenges included finding times for the all volunteer Action Teams to meet that fit the various schedules of the volunteers.

Early Successes:

- Action Teams met jointly to learn about resources and services available through a variety of state agencies. Among the panelists were representatives from the Dept. of Commerce, USDA Rural Development, Oklahoma State University Extension Rural Development and the Oklahoma Economic Development District.
- A local business man who attended the January kick-off donated use of a store where people could donate and/or pick up donated items.

Tensas Parish, Louisiana (March 23):

Action Teams:

- *Community Engagement in Education Action Team* is working to increase community engagement for youth in the Post Exit Opportunity Fair sponsored by the public school system. This year’s fair took place on April 22, 2010. The Action Team has generated a plan of action for next year’s event to increase community involvement, parental involvement and diversification of exhibitors.
- *Community Involvement in Local Causes Action Team* is working to promote greater support and utilization of the local food bank.
- *Civic Involvement to Foster Unity Action Team* is seeking to foster additional civic involvement in existing community events such as the Farmer’s Market and Music Fest.

Early Challenges centered on gaining momentum for this new approach. The Parish population is approximately 5,700 and has one of the highest parish/county poverty rates in the nation. These factors have contributed to a slow rate of adoption of the community process.

Early Successes revolve around the participation of an enthusiastic group of youth. These high school students made up the bulk of the Study Circles participants and have led the way for the formation of Action Teams. As one of the young participants put it, "We are part of the community and we are responsible."

Neshoba County, Mississippi (March 30):

Action Teams:

- *Education Action Team* plans to train local volunteers in Money Mentors and Master Teachers in Family Life, both of which are programs championed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service in which community volunteers are given advanced training in specific areas so that they can become coaches to other community members struggling with specific educational needs. Money Mentors targets financial concerns such as budgeting, saving, and other basic money management skills. Master Teachers in Family Life focuses on parenting and family communications skills. The Action Team plans to use the trained volunteers to target single parents and elderly individuals that can benefit from one or both of these programs. The initial volunteer training is set for June 23-25.
- *Community Outreach Action Team* has the goal of recruiting ten volunteers to form a team to assist the mayor with community requests.
- *The Food and Community Gardens Action Team* has two initiatives underway:
 - Start a community food bank in the small town of Union, MS. The Post Office in Union helped launch this initiative by holding a food drive at the end of April. More than 400 cans of food were donated. The Union church of Christ has volunteered to house and manage the food pantry, which is now "open for business."
 - Build 12 raised garden beds (4' x 8'). A local donor provided funds for the beds. Thus far, six garden kits have been placed with families in need.
- *Public Policy Action Team* plans to organize regular town meetings with small community groups. The Action Team is developing ground rules, explaining public policy, finding neutral facilities, as well as researching "What makes a successful town meeting?" to incorporate best practices into the process.
- *Community Resource Guide Action Team* is working to update an existing guide and to convert it into an electronic version that can be made available to local agencies, organizations, and the community. To date, the team has divided the existing guide into sections and team members

are contacting each agency within their assigned section to update the information.

Early Challenges:

- Moving into the summer months has created some challenges in getting Action Teams together for planning.
- The community garden group is finding that many of the families that might benefit from growing fresh vegetables in a raised bed do not have time or are not willing to try to grow food. Some elderly residents at the congregate home in Union were hoping to get some of the garden kits, but the management of the facility will not allow any gardens or structures to be placed on the premises due to issues with mowing and maintenance.

Early Successes:

- The Neshoba County teams have started a community blog to help facilitate communication among all groups: www.tideneshobacounty.com
- The editor of the Neshoba Democrat (local newspaper) took the old community resource guide and did some initial updates. He then published it in the paper the week of April 28th. This has been helpful in getting additional updates. Also, the Philadelphia school superintendent has offered to print the revised guide for all of his staff when it is complete.

Lauderdale County, Mississippi (May 4):

Action Teams – The Lauderdale County initiative focused on two separate communities, Collinsville and Meridian. Each community has formed Action Teams to pursue local Action Ideas:

Collinsville:

- *Farmers Market Action Team* has already secured a location at the Collinsville Community Development Club Pavilion and has distributed flyers all over the community to encourage anyone who grows produce to bring their extras to the market to sale. They are not charging any fees for farmers that wish to participate in the sale.
- *Collinsville Youth Service Action Team* is planning to launch a youth service organization in their community this coming fall.

Meridian:

- *Parental Involvement Action Team* is working to foster more parent involvement in the Meridian Public Schools. Two of the members of the group are going around to each housing community in the city and discussing with the residents the importance of involvement with their child's education.
- *Housing & Beautification Action Team* has begun meeting with the City of Meridian to see what can be done with some of the abandoned houses in

the city. They want to see if these houses can be converted into livable spaces for the low income residents. They are also looking at the possibility of planting community gardens on some of the vacant lots in the city.

- *Community Center Action Team* is exploring the possibility of converting the city's oldest historic black school, called Weschler School, into a Community Center for residents living near the building.

Early Challenges have centered on coordinating a time for the very diverse groups to meet as Action Teams. However, what has happened is that individuals that have interest in these Action Ideas have continued to meet on their own as best they could and are already making strides forward in spite of a lack of "formal" planning and organization.

Early Successes have been captured above in that these community members are so enthusiastic about the potential they see for improving their communities that they are making strides forward in a very grassroots manner. All of teams are meeting together on June 14th to solidify efforts to work together in a more unified manner, providing mutual support and encouragement.

Dallas County, Alabama (May 10):

Action Teams:

- *Community Pride Action Team* is planning comprehensive strategies for mobilizing the community by sections. Their plans include recruiting block captains, involving other agencies, establishing a beautification council, and enforcing ordinances that already exist.
- *Community Development Organization Action Team* is planning a fact finding tour to visit other communities similar to theirs that have had some success. They also plan to form a community organization to foster unity.
- *Job Training and Skill Development Action Team* is exploring short term training opportunities that could help train individuals and place them into jobs in a short time period (6-10 weeks).

Early Challenges included getting a diverse group to participate in the circles. Racial division still has an influence in the community.

Early Successes include a request from the City of Selma (county seat) to have a presentation about the Study Circle process. The city is considering using this approach to promote community dialogue within the city's wards.

Perry County, Alabama (May 11):

Action Teams:

- *Education Action Team* is planning to develop a community resource bank of skills within the community and to work with local schools to help inform parents of opportunities available to help students pursue potential careers.
- *Beautification Action Team* is seeking funds and partners to assist with a clean-up project to revitalize the appearance of US Highway 80 that runs directly through Uniontown.

Early Challenges included getting broad diversity of participants. Community members have struggled for many years with crossing lines of ethnicity and political interests to work in a unified manner. There was some progress made during the planning phase of this initiative. However, the actual study circles participants were all African American.

Early Successes included an openness about community concerns, respect for the process and respect for fellow participants. This is a significant step forward. And, as mentioned under “challenges,” it was encouraging to see Caucasians and African Americans at least planning together.

Elbert County, Georgia (July):

Elbert County is looking forward to holding its Action Forum in July. However, even though that formal process is not yet complete, the Study Circles sessions surfaced an Action Idea that has already taken shape. One concern that emerged during the dialogues was that many 9th grade students were failing math. Taking immediate action, the community formed a summer math camp targeting these students to help shore up their skills before beginning a new academic year. The camp will meet six times over the summer. Additionally, youth at risk of dropping out of school have been targeted for a unique training series on disaster management as a way to show them the importance of giving back to the community and to build workforce skills.

Early Challenges included reluctance on the part of community members to engage in the process initially, based on previous interaction with state led focus groups and forums. The community coach spent quite a bit of time explaining to community members that this process and its resulting action would belong to the community, not to an outside entity. Another challenge was that the community is in the middle of a confrontational discussion on a new incinerator that may be positioned in the community to serve the state.

Early Successes include wide community support from Public Health, Family Connection Partnership, the local school system, faith-based community groups, and the local government. Another success is that this group included a Poverty Simulation at its kick-off event that was well received and, according to planners, did a good job of laying the ground work for the Study Circles process.

St. Landry Parish, Louisiana (July 19):

St. Landry Parish, LA has had a couple of challenges in getting this initiative off the ground. The first struggle came when its community coach took another position out of state. With the core planning team just beginning to form, the team lacked a vision for the process to carry them through the next steps on their own. However, once a new coach was recruited, the Core Team quickly got up to speed and has done a remarkable job of generating enthusiasm for the project. Overwhelming support from the mayor in the town of Washington has enhanced the efforts of the volunteer core team. The mayor's "whatever it takes to succeed" attitude has been an encouragement to the core planning team as they plan for their June 12th kick-off event.

Summary:

In just a short few months, eight struggling communities have taken positive steps in making the Turning the Tide on Poverty a valuable program and process for their residents. By taking the time to thoughtfully discuss the causes of poverty, develop potential avenues for addressing this and related challenges, and put key strategies in action, several hundred individuals have joined hands within their communities in an effort to turn their communities around. While the fruits of their efforts are just beginning to take shape, it is clear that the Study Circles process, coupled with the Action Phase, can provide a viable mechanism for community members to engage in meaningful dialogue that can result in significant change. No single group or organization can ever match the power of a diverse group of community members that want to make a difference in improving conditions in their community. By engaging in a process of meaningful involvement, the rich talents, insights, and abilities of local people and organizations can be weaved together to form a new fabric of a thriving community.

As this initial phase comes to a close, the Southern Rural Development Center wishes to join with state and community partners in the eight pilot sites to extend a heart-felt "thank you" to the Farm Foundation for providing this opportunity to explore this initiative. It is our hope that we can continue this partnership in the future, allowing the SRDC to further cultivate progress in these eight sites as well as expand the initiative to other communities across the Southern region.