



## Regional Solutions for Rural and Urban Challenges Delta Conversation

**Venue:** Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Memphis Branch, Memphis, TN

**Date:** December 3, 2019

### Participants:

- Daniel Davis, Assistant Vice President and Community Affairs Officer, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (Memphis, TN)
- Meredith Covington, Community Development Manager, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (St. Louis, MO)
- Martha Claire Drysdale, Community Development Director, Foundation for the Mid South (Jackson, MS)
- Leonette Henderson, Director of Development & Partnerships, Higher Purpose Co (Clarksdale, MS)
- Laura Martin, Associate Director, McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, University of Mississippi (Oxford, MS)
- Karama Neal, President, Southern Bancorp Community Partners (Little Rock, AR)
- Tom Pittman, President & CEO, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi (Hernando, MS)
- Ines Polonius, CEO, Communities Unlimited (Fayetteville, AR)
- Cynthia Terry, Director of Entrepreneurship, Communities Unlimited (Memphis, TN)
  
- Brian Dabson, Research Fellow, School of Government, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (Durham, NC)
- Travis Green, Vice President & Solutions Consultant, LOCUS Impact Investing (Washington DC)
- Tim Lampkin, CEO, Higher Purpose Co (Clarksdale, MS)
- Deborah Markley, Senior Vice President, LOCUS Impact Investing (Chapel Hill, NC)
- Alan Okagaki, Consultant (Missoula, MT)

### Rationale

The process for selecting case study sites for the *Regional Solutions* project resulted in no representation from the Delta. The region's complex and deep-seated challenges of race and disinvestment provide an important test for the relevance of the project's findings. The meeting was convened by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis whose service territory extends over seven states, including Arkansas, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee in the Delta. Invited to the meeting were representatives from organizations in the Delta who have a stake in the future of the region and who could make a substantive contribution to a discussion about the relevance of regional collaboration and solution-seeking.



## Structure

Following introduction, the project team gave a PowerPoint presentation on the purpose, approach, and key insights from the case study research in seven locations across the United States. There followed an extensive discussion about possible points of resonance and dissonance with the participants' experience in the Delta.

## Themes

While there was much that did ring true to participants, they highlighted some important conditions in the Delta (and perhaps in other rural regions characterized by persistent poverty, low population density and dispersed communities) that make regional solutions much harder. They also affirmed that no significant and important regional collaboration had been missed. Some of the themes are:

1. Low population density and distance between communities makes regional action more difficult. It is just harder to make the connections and to see how regional action can lift all boats.
2. It is challenging for community and organizational leaders in areas of persistent poverty to embrace a “we all do better if we all do better” philosophy. There is a “just getting by” reality that makes regional collaboration difficult and at a cost that is too high to bear.
3. In places like the Delta, it is hard for good ideas to get to scale because of the limited and episodic philanthropic investment in capacity building. There is a stark contrast between the long-term investment evidenced in Minnesota and the shorter term, “in and out” investment that has been the norm in the Delta. Similarly, regionalism and regional collaboration take resources which are limited in the Delta.
4. There are few truly urban places in the Delta. This raises a question about whether there are lessons from the project that might speak to connecting rural communities to each other in ways that benefit all people and places.
5. The same idea of “rooted in rural” that resonated in Minnesota applies to the Delta. People in urban places still feel connected to the places in the Delta where their kin are from. This is a hook that could be used to advantage regional solutions.
6. Systemic racism is an underlying issue in the Delta that impacts the way urban thinks about rural (“don’t want any more rural black folks coming to Memphis”). But income disparities and class represent other important components of equity in the Delta.
7. The unique multi-state nature of the Delta also creates challenges for regionalism. State lines make a difference and are effectively impeding regional solutions (with the possible exception of the federally mandated workforce effort referenced by Foundation for the Mid-South).
8. Growth in Latinx population seems to be an urban to rural phenomenon – Latinx people moving from urban to rural areas because they feel safer in rural places where it is easier to know who to stay away from. This provides an interesting connection in terms of federal policy influencing rural-urban dynamics.
9. There are few if any coordinated political alliances designed to elevate the rural voice in the Delta. The perception is that the Delta Regional Authority is not playing this role (as compared to the Appalachian Regional Commission in Appalachia).
10. Care is needed in assuming that political power always favors urban over rural. In Arkansas, there is political power in rural. The real issue is in whose hands that power resides and whether it is used to serve all people and all places.





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