

no. 06

OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

A New Generation of Southerners

Youth Organizing in the South

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The Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO) is a collective of national, regional and local foundations and youth organizing practitioners dedicated to advancing youth organizing as a strategy for youth development and social justice. The mission of the FCYO is to substantially increase the philanthropic investment in and strengthen the organizational capacities of youth organizing groups across the country.

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- Support youth organizing groups to develop stable and sustainable organizations; and
- Increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders and community organizations.

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ABOUT THE OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES ON YOUTH ORGANIZING

The Occasional Papers Series is edited and published by the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing, and conceived and developed in close partnership with a Committee of funders, intermediaries and youth organizing practitioners. Critical editing support was provided by Neil Carlson. The Committee for this paper included:

- Emmanuel Tedder, Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment
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- Paulina Hernandez, Highlander Research and Education Center
- Robyn Davis, Southern Partners Fund
- William Buster, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

The FCYO extends its deep-felt gratitude to each of the individuals who contributed their invaluable insight, time and support to the making of this paper. Thanks to the Edward W. Hazen, Hill-Snowdon, and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations for their generous support of the publication of this Series.

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Youth Organizing in the South

BY CHARLES PRICE + KIM DIEHL

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SERIES PREFACE

In 2003, the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing released the first installment of Occasional Papers to chart the terrain of youth organizing—its core definitions, theoretical underpinnings and common practices. These papers helped provoke greater discussion about the efforts of low-income youth and youth of color to change the schools and institutions that adversely impact their communities. But our work had only just begun. While the field shares many principles and approaches, a one-size-fits-all approach does not adequately convey the dynamism and variation found within youth organizing.

This next installment takes us on a tour of youth organizing in different regions of the country, beginning with California and the Southeast. We examine the work in the context of the elements, conditions and environment that seeded, nurtured and arrested its growth and evolution. Thus, two primary questions drive these papers: What conditions spurred the emergence and growth of youth organizing in the region? And how did this context shape the region's particular breed of youth organizing?

In *The West Coast Story: The Emergence of Youth Organizing in California*, Ryan Pintado-Vertner analyzes the emergence and practice of youth organizing amidst California's bellwether politics and culture, and the immense geopolitical and cultural diversity of its subregions—Los Angeles, San Diego, the San Francisco Bay Area, and the Central Valley.

In *A New Generation of Southerners: Youth Organizing in the South*, Charles Price and Kim Diehl illuminate the physical isolation, entrenched fear and patterns of discrimination that have stalled community-building in the South, alongside the region's growing diversity, cross-generational bonds and rich resistance traditions on which youth organizing is now building.

For the FCYO, the necessity and urgency of supporting these efforts are clear. For too many youth and their families, the American ideals of security, prosperity and opportunity have faded into rhetoric. Amidst grim circumstances, young people across the nation have found spaces in the burgeoning field of youth organizing to engage in truth-telling and action, working not out of mere anger and protest, but enduring hope in the promise of fairness and equity. The youth and adults behind youth organizing firmly believe that the heritage and everyday experience of their communities, much of it untold or even distorted, comprise a priceless manual for their future. These papers bring us closer to their experiences. They acknowledge the ample challenges confronting youth organizing, and the critical support needed to overcome the obstacles. But more importantly, they stand as a tribute to the incredible feats, dedication and sacrifice of youth and their allies in imagining a better world is possible.

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August 2004*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE SOUTH IN TRANSITION: TWENTY FIRST CENTURY REALITIES	4
<i>New Patterns, Old Problems</i>	4
<i>Young People in the South</i>	6
ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTH	8
<i>Political Exclusion and Fear: An Old South Legacy Adapts to the New South</i>	8
<i>Resistance Traditions: "The Struggle is Eternal. Somebody Else Carries On."</i>	10
YOUTH ORGANIZING: NEGOTIATING GOALS, STRATEGIES AND DEFINITIONS	12
<i>Aiming for Liberation: Overcoming Fear and Rebuilding Hope</i>	14
<i>Building Place-based Power through Leadership</i>	15
<i>Building Intergenerational Relationships and Community Empowerment Capacities</i>	16
<i>Honoring a Culture of Respect</i>	17
<i>Using Culture, Identity, and History to Educate, Uplift and Build Community</i>	18
BUILDING CAPACITY AND MOVEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES	20
<i>Infrastructure Challenges: Transportation, Access and Scale</i>	20
<i>Pivotal Role of Networks and Support Organizations</i>	21
THE FUTURE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING: DIFFICULT BUT PROMISING	24
<i>Some Recommendations</i>	25
RESOURCES	27

INTRODUCTION

To look at Jose Ramirez seven years ago was to see a young person on the edge. “I was on the street, living in group homes, trying to commit suicide,” Ramirez recalls. Growing up gay and Latino in North Carolina had hardened the tenth grader, so he was skeptical when a counselor recommended Ramirez look into the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network (NCLYN), a leadership development network for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied youth based in Durham. “At first I was like, Whatever,” he says. But Ramirez eventually joined NCLYN’s summer leadership institute, and as he started going to conferences and meeting other young people like him he grew more confident. “I was taught to be a leader and that I am somebody,” he says. Through the network, Ramirez gained skills and found a new interest in education. He eventually graduated from school, and now, at the age of twenty-two, Ramirez helps to empower other young people as leaders and educators.

Emmanuel Tedder’s introduction to the world of organizing came eight years ago, at the ripe age of ten, when he first accompanied adults to meetings of the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE), a statewide economic justice organization based in Greenville, South Carolina. At the time, CAFE focused on workers’ rights, and Tedder recalls wondering how young people fit into the issues they were talking about. “Even though the adults had issues that they wanted to work on, they did not really apply to me,” Tedder recalls. Now eighteen years-old, Tedder has been instrumental in helping to push CAFE to focus on young people’s concerns. “We found out that a lot of youth also wanted to take part in the organization, but they also wanted to handle their own issues. So we built the Darlington [South Carolina] youth chapter, first focusing on issues that really affect youth.” CAFE began organizing young people in 1998, and the organization now boasts a solid membership base of over 400 young people spread across four chapters. As the oldest, the Darlington chapter has won a string of victories, including seminal reforms in local secondary school policies.

Ramirez and Tedder exemplify the different paths young people in the South take on their way toward becoming leaders and activists in the emerging field of youth

organizing.¹ Confused and self-destructive, Ramirez sought a safe space and support for personal affirmation and healing, while Tedder and his peers craved more autonomy as they tackled the injustices they and other members of their community faced in their daily lives. Though Ramirez and Tedder came to youth organizing through different paths, their experiences converged in work that blended social justice and leadership development into a strategy for long-term, community-based social change.

Across America, young people are beginning to organize around “youth” as a unique political identity and a foundation for participating in a broader social justice movement. The South is no exception.² Yet at the very moment in which a new cadre of leaders is urgently needed, the South’s dismal public education system, its limited economic opportunities, and the entrenched poverty of the Black Belt, inner cities, Appalachia, and Rio Grande region have spurred an exodus of young people, especially Blacks, out of the South in search of better opportunities. For those young people that remain behind—and for a new generation of new immigrants that has recently joined them—the challenges they face are daunting. Young organizers must have a clear, resonant voice in current public policy debates, while also building alliances with their peers and adults to achieve long-term, wholesale changes in their schools and communities. Young people (and their adult allies) must organize themselves as a new political force and establish themselves as community leaders, drawing inspiration from the region’s many resistance traditions and situating themselves amidst the South’s unique history, culture, and folkways.

The South occupies a central place in America’s historical memory. As the region where the first people of people of color were imported en mass and in bondage, its slave trade spurred a Civil War and shaped our Constitution. The region engendered the Civil Rights movement, forcing the nation to confront the moral and

¹ By organizing we mean practices that involve developing leadership, building alliances and networks, and identifying and solving problems—all in order to empower young people to effectively engage in social justice-oriented change. While focused on work happening through formal 501(c)3 organizations, we recognize that other types of organizing by young people happens on college campuses and through alternative structures. We recognize that the term “youth organizing,” while used throughout the paper, encompasses intergenerational, youth development and other work that others may describe in different language.

² A note on what we call “The South.” For this report, the South includes thirteen states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. While each state’s history is rooted in its own particular settlement patterns, economic and political structures, and relationships to surrounding states, youth across the region are recognizing that they share many experiences and problems.

political consequences of American apartheid. These struggles have inspired social justice work across the country and around the globe. They have also been reminders that overtly endorsed racism and oppression are not too far in our past, and in fact, continue into the present. Most recently, the presidential election of 2000 alerted the nation that political disenfranchisement in the South undermines our very democracy. It is thus critical that special attention is paid to the region's distinct sociopolitical trends and organized community responses, and how such forces impact the South and country overall.

This paper surveys and analyzes youth-oriented organizing within the context of Southern history, identity, culture, and its elusive but powerful sense of place. First, we explore the shifting characteristics that define the region and its organizing traditions. Next, we examine how this context and history have shaped the particular approach and practice of contemporary youth organizing in the South. We conclude with thoughts on how a place-based understanding of the South should inform social justice work in the region.

THE SOUTH IN TRANSITION: TWENTY FIRST CENTURY REALITIES

The idea of a “New South”—a South exorcised of its slavery, oppression, defiance, and hostility to social change—dates to the late nineteenth century. Since then, politicians, business leaders, and others have used the idea of the New South to obscure the persistence of the Old South—entrenched poverty, conservative politics, exploited labor, racial segregation, and pervasive religiosity. Young people and their allies to this day struggle against this Old South legacy. But they are also heirs to a legacy of bold resistance, strong cultural identities, community bonds, and place-based allegiances.

4

NEW PATTERNS, OLD PROBLEMS

In many ways the South is undergoing a sea change. Over the past twenty years, a wave of new immigrants has transformed the geography of race and ethnicity throughout the South. Gone is the clear black-white dichotomy as Mexican, Asian, Central American and African people migrate to Southern cities and small towns. Population growth of Latinos over the past twenty years has eclipsed that of Blacks—though Blacks still constitute more than twenty-five percent of the population in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Of the 3.5 million youth added to the region’s population during the 1990s, more than half were Latinos, and twenty-eight percent were Black. The South is also home to a significant population of Native Americans; North Carolina has one of the largest populations in the country. Meanwhile, the percentage of White children continues to decline. In short, diversity is a defining feature of what it means to be young in the South today.

The South is nevertheless still overwhelmingly rural compared to the rest of the United States. At least half the population of four states—West Virginia, Mississippi, Kentucky, and Arkansas—lives in rural areas. Twenty-six percent of Southerners live in rural areas compared to twenty percent of Americans overall. Yet rapid urbanization and other economic shifts are also transforming the region. The agrarian economy that prevailed in the South through World War II is no longer a primary source

of employment as farms have either vanished or scaled up into highly mechanized industrial firms. For much of the twentieth century, the South's manufacturing base in textiles and raw materials was buoyed by cheap, nonunion labor, tax abatements, and lax environmental policies. Industrial employment in the South may never have been good, safe work—but it was work. Over the past twenty-five years, however, the South's industrial base has been decimated as many operations moved overseas, devastating working class and poor communities throughout the South.

As farming and manufacturing waned, new industries have emerged. Retail and service delivery are the fastest growing sectors, with pockets of high-tech, research, and financial services. Between 1980 and 2000, job growth in the South outpaced the nation overall. But the flip side of growth has been increasing stratification along racial lines and between urban and rural areas. Jobs in prison construction and maintenance, waste storage, gaming, poultry, and meat processing are currently the main employment options within many poor Southern communities. These are low-wage, dead-end jobs of questionable social and environmental value. The South's 13.5 percent poverty rate, moreover, is the nation's highest. One-half of the nation's non-metro poor reside in the South, and nearly 4.6 million children, one out of five, live in a household below the poverty line, including thirty-four percent of Black children, twenty-eight percent of Latinos, and eleven percent of white children. Twenty-five percent of Native American youth in the South live below poverty level.

The geography of the South has undergone radical change as well. Suburban sprawl is rampant throughout the region, a trend that has fundamentally altered Southern notions of community and changed the quality of life in many rural towns and suburbs. Suburbs now stretch into formerly small towns or rural areas, while both urbanites and suburbanites desirous of rural living have expanded to the countryside, taking with them their ideas and skill sets. Although demographers and urban planners speak of large cities, many Southern urban centers are actually agglomerations of smaller cities that have absorbed formerly rural counties. Examples of these shifts include: Charlotte, Raleigh, and Greensboro in North Carolina; Jacksonville, West Palm-Fort Lauderdale-Miami, and Tampa in Florida; the Washington, DC suburbs of Northern Virginia; and Atlanta, Georgia. Because growing numbers of new service sector jobs are located in prosperous suburbs, inner city and rural residents who cannot afford to live in them face long, expensive commutes to work. In suburbanized coastal regions of South Carolina like Myrtle Beach and Hilton Head Island, for example, predominantly Black workers are bussed in from poorer inland communities to staff hospitality and service businesses. Some commute up to ninety minutes each way.

As industrial agriculture supplanted family farming throughout the South, the downstream effects have been disastrous for many young people. Industrial agriculture relies on herbicides and pesticides, which harm not only farmworkers but entire rural communities. Chemical use is often concentrated near poorer schools and communities, where environmental hazards compound already shoddy, underfunded schools and have been linked to disproportionately high learning disability rates among youth. In Indianola, Mississippi, for example, airplanes routinely sprayed chemicals on fields adjacent to residential communities, a senior citizen center, and Merritt Middle School, where it contaminated students' air, water, and food. But controlling environmental damage was a low priority for the farmers. The Indianola Student Parent Group, founded in 1999 to ensure equity in educational opportunities, is currently working to collect evidence of toxicity in the field and halt such practices.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SOUTH

These social, economic, and political shifts are redrawing the Southern landscape for future generations. With Black and Latino youth constituting two of the fastest growing populations in the South, addressing racially disparate outcomes in education, incarceration, health, and income will be critical in determining the region's overall harmony, prosperity, and opportunity. While the South contains more than one-third of the nation's eighteen-to-twenty-four year-olds, it also has an alarming percentage of "disconnected youth"—youth with twelve years or less of education, who have been unemployed for a year or longer, or who are or have been imprisoned. According to a 2003 report by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, nearly one-half of the nation's disconnected male youth are in the South, and sixty-one percent of them are Black.

For a generation of young people seeking to avoid this social dislocation, hope lies where it always has—in education. Completing high school and preparing for college is an imperative, especially for youth of color. Yet the state of public education in the South is abysmal. *Brown v. Board of Education* may have struck a lethal blow to legal segregation a half century ago, but educational inequities persist, and reformers frequently face stiff opposition. In many towns and cities throughout the South, fifty years of progress has yielded to "resegregation." Private schools service a predominantly White population, while youth of color are the primary consumers of poorly funded public schools, especially in inner cities and rural areas. In 2000, nearly twenty-five percent of Whites in the South had bachelor degrees, compared to thirteen percent of

Blacks and twelve percent of Latinos. Likewise, college enrollment among youth of color in rural and poor communities lags behind their peers in metropolitan areas. While fifteen percent of non-metropolitan youth attain bachelor's degrees, nearly twice as many of their metropolitan counterparts do.

School consolidation has reinforced these inequities. Intended to reduce fiscal inefficiencies and expand services for rural youth, consolidation in poor rural areas has instead forced many students to extend already long and expensive bus rides, deterred students from extracurricular activities, and limited parent participation in school policy and decision-making. These very factors may often lead to increased drop-out rates and diminished opportunities for students to groom themselves for postsecondary education admittance.

With frightening logic, poor education becomes a gateway to prison, a growth industry in the South. Across the country, many schools have modeled their disciplinary policies on the rhetoric and practice of the War on Drugs. Penal concepts like mandatory sentencing, "three strikes," and "zero tolerance" are now the basis for school codes that govern the lives of many students of color. Mac Epps of Southern Echo, a leadership education, training and development organization founded in 1989 to encourage intergenerational organizing among Black and working class

Percentages of
African Americans
suspended as a total of
the state's student
enrollment in
selected states:

Alabama **59%**
Arkansas **42%**
Georgia **64%**
Mississippi **70%**
South Carolina **63%**
Virginia **50%**

communities throughout Mississippi, points to the disparities between drug and education policy in majority-White versus majority-Black districts. "Majority-White schools have counselors, different programs, and workshops [to address drug related concerns]," he says. "We got security guards, metal detectors and dragnet searches."

Too often, education and incarceration are pitted against each other in a zero-sum game. Despite a national fiscal crisis that has precipitated education cuts and higher state and local taxes, the corrections industry is booming. Between 1985 and 2001, budget increases for prisons in some states represented between twenty-seven percent (North Carolina) and more than ninety percent (Georgia) of the overall fiscal shortfalls that forced communities to choose among funding libraries, schools, and public services. Not surprisingly, many youth of color are falling out of the school system and into the correctional system. According to a 2004 report from the Manpower Development Corporation, Louisiana and Texas have more Black men in prison than in college—and other Southern states are proceeding along a similar path.

ORGANIZING IN THE SOUTH

Behind the times, gun-loving, racist, conservative, religiously zealous, impossible to organize—while these caricatures of the South contain threads of truth, they also overlook the South's prominence as a crucible of progressive social change, from the Populist movement of the late nineteenth century to the Civil Rights movement in the twentieth century. These competing characterizations reflect both the challenges and promise of social change and community organizing work in the region. Like their peers elsewhere in America, organizers in the South use a variety of tools to change public policies, reform political and economic systems, and strengthen communities. These strategies include community outreach, political education, leadership development, research and issue identification, campaign development, and mobilization. Yet successful organizing in the South has a uniquely Southern character—one attuned to the peculiarities of culture, customs, and place, and rooted in the legacy of struggle and resistance that shapes individuals and their worldviews. Put another way, Southern organizing is positioned between two opposing poles: a culture of exclusion, violence, and fear; and a legacy of resistance, hope, and progress.

POLITICAL EXCLUSION AND FEAR: AN OLD SOUTH LEGACY ADAPTS TO THE NEW SOUTH

In 1972, the political scientist Daniel Elazar described the “traditional” political culture of most Southern states. As part of “the ordered nature of things,” Elazar argued, political power is structured around social and economic elites. Industrial barons, wealthy merchants, and planter aristocrats believed that power and success conferred upon them the inherent right to govern and that “those who do not have a definite role to play in politics are not expected to be even minimally active as citizens.” Even now, political and economic elites resist calls for broader citizen participation. Right-to-work laws have kept unions weak throughout the South, thus stifling one of the principal mechanisms low-income workers and workers of color have used to gain a

political voice and economic power. Slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow have etched racism into social practices so that people and institutions perpetuate discrimination even though they may not explicitly endorse it. And voting rights remain a contentious struggle for communities of color in the South. In the 2000 Presidential election, more than 95,000 Black votes were purged from voting lists in Florida. Disproportionately high rates of incarceration have further disenfranchised vast numbers of people of color in the South. Florida denies thirty-one percent of its Black men the right to vote for life due to past criminal convictions. The South accounts for four out of every ten Americans in prison or jail. Community members often describe the resurgence of prison labor as a reinvention and continuation of slave practices. Following the 2000 census, congressional redistricting plans will further dilute the voting strength of districts with a strong Black presence.

Resistance has often been met with retribution, from violent lynchings to more subtle forms of coercion. Fear thus plays a central role in maintaining the political and economic status quo. Today, fear revolves around losing a job, being punished by teachers and administrators who single out activist youth or the offspring of activist parents, or being ostracized by peers for getting involved in that “mess” called organizing. Small town and rural contexts make retaliation easier due to people’s overlapping social connections and scarce economic and education options. A powerful school official may be good friends with a county judge, local attorneys, bankers, law enforcement officers and merchants, and may use those social connections to get an activist youth or parent blacklisted through word-of-mouth. While some young people may be willing to speak out, it may be their parents who pay for their outspokenness by losing a job, a loan, or credit with a local merchant.

Race, culture, language, gender, and sexuality complicate the Southern organizing is positioned between two opposing poles: a culture of exclusion, violence, and fear; and a legacy of resistance, hope, and progress. South’s culture of fear. Recent immigrants, for example, often eschew organizing because they fear deportation or are not fluent in English. Progressive Whites, meanwhile, face special opprobrium when they support racial justice. “Whites face retaliation if other Whites know that they are working with Black people on social justice; as long as they work with Whites it’s okay,” says one Mississippi community leader. “But once they cross that color bar....” Similarly, organizations focused on non-heterosexual identities face discrimination, violence, and other challenges stemming from biblical and ethnocentric notions of what constitutes being “normal.” Micah Bowles, a Youth Outreach Coordinator at Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network (JASMYN) in

Jacksonville, Florida, underscores this point. “The fear of being outed and not being accepted is a big factor in getting youth involved with JASMYN. If they get too visible, they’re really worried about backlash and rejection.” As a key organizer of the Northeast Florida Safe Schools Coalition, JASMYN works to promote social change and respect for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth in a radically conservative town. But the obstacles are steep. A local Jacksonville church, for example, owns more than twelve downtown city blocks and exerts major political clout by endorsing fundamentalist political candidates and pushing a social conservative agenda.

Addressing fear of reprisals is essential to successful organizing in the South. For JASMYN, creating safe space is a fundamental aspect of work that also includes leadership development, civic participation, consciousness-raising, and education around oppression, identity, and sexuality. Other organizing groups—such as Citizens for Quality Education, which was founded in 1996 to improve the public school system in Holmes County, and Mississippi, and Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County, an intergenerational group organizing to address root causes of inequity and injustice in Tunica, Mississippi—make sure that young people avoid situations where they are isolated from their peers or adult allies. In this climate of fear, even a seemingly small gesture—such as having a few reluctant parents speak at a school board or city council meeting—constitutes an organizing victory.

RESISTANCE TRADITIONS: “THE STRUGGLE IS ETERNAL. SOMEBODY ELSE CARRIES ON.”

To speak of organizing and the South evokes powerful, inspirational, and *hopeful* images of the Civil Rights movement, including the most visible luminaries of that period, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ella Baker, who embody two overlapping strands of progressive leadership in the South. King was a charismatic orator who aroused and mobilized others, while Baker’s behind-the-scenes leadership within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) revolved around empowerment, leadership development, and community and relationship-building. Together, their work brought national attention to civil rights struggles in the South. Yet their movements emerged from groundwork laid by lesser known radical Southern organizing traditions. While the history of Southern organizing is well-discussed, these traditions have often been isolated from each other and sometimes caricatured into folk history rather than linked to present-day organizing.

Even a seemingly small gesture—such as having a few reluctant parents speak at a school board or city council meeting—constitutes an organizing victory.

During the early- to mid-twentieth century, unions and other progressive organizations sought to organize tenant farmers and trade and industrial workers, especially miners and dock workers. Occasionally, the young people they trained became instrumental to Southern organizing work. Covington Hall, a White International Workers of the World organizer went on to work in Louisiana and East Texas. The activism of Bayard Rustin, the noted Civil Rights movement organizer, grew out of the Young Communist League. And Hosea Hudson was a black steelworker and Congress of Industrial Organizations organizer in Birmingham, Alabama. Meanwhile, one of the most important organizing *institutions* of the pre-Civil Rights era was the Highlander Education and Research Center, an educational training center based in New Market, Tennessee. Rosa Parks was actually trained at Highlander. Founded by Myles Horton and others in 1932, the Highlander Center helped communities acquire the tools they needed to organize social change movements. The Center was instrumental in developing a model that emphasized place, culture, and local traditions in organizing work as a basis for the trust and conviction people needed to sustain social movements.

Youth leadership development was central to pre-Civil Rights organizing work too. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had 150 youth and college chapters by 1940. Not all chapters were involved in organizing—especially community organizing as conceived today—but many core activities of contemporary youth organizing emerged from this early work, including developing leadership, raising consciousness, identifying and analyzing social issues, building a base of power, and forging alliances with like-minded organizations. As the Civil Rights movement took shape, leaders like Ella Baker helped place young people at the center of social change. SNCC's early organizing work influenced other movements, including the Black Power, anti-war, national liberation, women's, American Indian, and welfare rights movements.

YOUTH ORGANIZING: NEGOTIATING GOALS, STRATEGIES AND DEFINITIONS

Because of the South's long and difficult history, as well as the political ascent of the Right throughout the region, many outsiders dismiss the South as being impossible to organize for a progressive vision. Yet the opposite is true: Southerners have successfully organized for change under seemingly impossible circumstances, and the fact that they continue to do so today is a source of inspiration for young people. Change may be difficult, but it is possible. Young people in the South today draw on over a century's worth of experience and lessons as they struggle to change their lives and the circumstances that constrain them. Partnering with adults, they are working to increase civic participation and political representation of communities of color, secure access to quality public goods, and challenge punitive policies that put youth on the path toward incarceration.

Like their peers across the nation, young people in the South are confronting issues around schools and education, juvenile and adult correctional policies, environmental degradation, voting and political participation, race, sexuality, and gender. But youth organizing in the South is distinctly Southern, shaped by strong currents of culture, place, and history. Whereas youth organizing groups on either coast may focus on single issues like education reform, the very visible intersections of racism and discrimination across education, labor, environmental, criminal justice and other issues in small and rural towns force Southern organizers to take a broader view. Likewise, the paucity of progressive infrastructure requires organizers to be even more intentional about organizing work that is broad-based and multi-issue, and addresses the root causes of problems confronting Southern communities.

In describing their work, many Southern organizers of whatever generation challenge the labels and categories associated with the nascent field of youth organizing nationwide. As a member of the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network explains, "Social justice work with young people is what we do. Not youth development, not youth organizing." While at the surface this disagreement is about semantics, it is also about who defines what and in what language. Organizing models in the

RIGHT TO BETTER LEARNING AND LIVING

Darlington, South Carolina, a rural county dotted by small towns and hamlets with a large, visible influx of Latinos, is in many ways emblematic of the complex web of issues facing young people in the rural South. Here, young people associated with the Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFE) have worked to end mass searches, drug sweeps, and harsh disciplinary policies that have become a routine part of the high school experience. In a county where factory jobs are rare and high school graduates have few employment options other than Wal-Mart and other convenience stores, CAFE recognizes that suspension and heavy discipline have fed too many youth

into the juvenile justice system. CAFE organizers convinced schools to adopt a policy requiring school officials to inform students and parents of their rights. As a result, there has been a sharp drop in suspensions. They have also drawn attention to the lack of information provided to students about college preparation and enhancement programs, and persuaded the School Board to inform parents about the Gifted and Talented Program in which students of color were under-represented. While most of the youth organizers' energy has poured into education-related issues, they also helped get a road paved in one of their communities.

South do not exactly match the prevailing paradigms used by national funders, organizing networks, and big city youth organizing groups. Given decades of oppression, divestment, disenfranchisement, reprisal and isolation, poor people and people of color in the South are still fighting for basic freedoms and essentials in the South. The components of youth organizing therefore reflect long-term strategies that seek to actualize visions and missions of community empowerment, build voice and representation, eliminate oppression, and overcome apathy and hopelessness.

At the crux of Southern organizing work are two intersecting aims. First, to liberate people suffering from internalized oppression. Second, to rebuild the very fabric and power of communities confronted with longstanding discrimination. In the South, both objectives require organizers and community members to confront racism head on and to reform racially inequitable structures and policies. Fundamentally, this task demands community-minded leadership, solid networks, and organizational infrastructures that rest on a bedrock of intergenerational strength. The work and strategies for change must also honor local cultures, speak to individual experiences and collective memory, and place current work in the context of past struggles. As the Southerner William Faulkner once wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

AIMING FOR LIBERATION: OVERCOMING FEAR AND REBUILDING HOPE

Youth and adult allies often describe struggling against “plantation mentalities” of many older Southerners. Too many believe things cannot change for the better. Or fear standing up to elites. Or are averse to engaging new ideas and building new relationships beyond their personal worlds. In contrast, young people tend to be more risk-taking and flexible. They are less jaded, refusing to believe that poor people of color have no power. Because of their penchant for risk and their belief in possibility, young people are essential catalysts for change in many Southern communities. At the same time, however, hope and optimism must be balanced by a subtle understanding of where people are coming from. As Margarita Romo, founder and Director of Farmworkers Self Help in Dade City, Florida notes, “Foundations want to know what the people want. Sometimes the people have been so oppressed they don’t know what they want. Our work is to get them to a place where they have the capacity to dream and the skills to make change.” In the face of deeply rooted fear and hopelessness, youth organizing groups, especially in small towns and rural areas, find that an essential part of social justice work is treating personal suffering and trauma, and changing individual mindsets and worldviews. Paulina Hernandez of the Highlander Center frames it succinctly: “Liberation has to be a part of everything.”

As part of liberation, Southern activists encourage people to understand their rights and claim ownership over their roles in political processes. Many groups emphasize helping young people overcome their fears about political participation, and feel confident about claiming their rightful space in both local and national democracy. Consider the example of Youth Task Force, one of the oldest youth-led organizations working with African-American youth on social and environmental justice issues. Based in Atlanta, Georgia, Youth Task Force teaches students about political processes and collective problem-solving against the backdrop of black liberation history. As a part of the training regimen, young people conduct mock legislative sessions at the state legislature. “We use the whole state capitol because I want to get them to the point where it’s their building,” says organizer Rashad Taylor. “I don’t want them to be intimidated to get involved and go to the capital.”

Voting is a prime example of how systematic barriers, discrimination, and intimidation have suppressed political involvement and generated widespread disenchantment. Against a backdrop of cynicism, however, The Women’s Project in Little Rock, Arkansas, organizes young women from eight to seventeen years of age to increase voter turnout and inform formerly incarcerated people about regaining voting rights.

RECLAIMING RESOURCES

For young people at Community Impact in Nashville, Tennessee, place-based work is a metaphor for engaging communities for neighborhood improvement and service delivery. Community Impact youth and adult allies implemented a program that trained community volunteers to provide income tax assistance for local residents. As a result, an estimated \$100,000 stayed in their community. They also led a successful crusade to restructure exorbitant fees charged by local check cashing stores.

“The fact that so many people [in the South] have been disenfranchised is a big issue and youth begin to understand what voting means in their lives,” says program coordinator Randi Romo. “They start to say, ‘These people need to get out and vote, and get elders to understand that this really matters to us.’”

BUILDING PLACE-BASED POWER THROUGH LEADERSHIP

Southern youth organizing emphasizes strategies that build broad-based, enduring community power that is rooted in a sense of place. According to Rosa Shareef, an organizer with People in the Community Helping, an affiliate of Southern Echo based in Marion County, Mississippi, the job of social justice organizations is twofold—to instill in youth a commitment to their communities and to create a place that they will want to stay in or return to. Given this emphasis on place, history, family and roots, many Southern organizers are skeptical of “campaigns,” which they view as focused on short-term gains or single issues. Southern organizers prefer to emphasize the long-term, and often painstaking, development of leaders and communities.

Veteran organizer Hollis Watkins of Southern Echo underscores this need for leadership development as a fundamental part of justice and empowerment work. “I take the position that most of the stuff we did during the sixties was not organizing, but mobilizing,” he says. “I take the position that there are very, very few of us today actually doing organizing. If you are organizing, there is an empowering process that takes place in the community. But when you look at what most of us are doing, there is not the empowering element for the community. At best you will usurp one or two people, train them to be further gatekeepers of the empowering process and the community never becomes empowered, but remains dependent upon those one or two saviors.”

BUILDING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT CAPACITIES

There are few organizations in the South that are run solely by young people. For a variety of reasons—the isolation of rural communities, the threat of retribution for dissent, and the need for social cohesion in tight-knit communities—adults and young people recognize that the long-term success of organizing and developing leadership depends on their ability to work across generations. This strong interdependence is not only rooted in the region's historic activist traditions, but it also acknowledges that socioeconomic forces are pushing youth out of their communities or into dead-end jobs. There is a pragmatic element to intergenerational partnerships as well. Because young people in the South are isolated from the training networks and resources available to their peers on either coast, home-grown intergenerational partnerships are the conduits through which preceding generations pass along their memory and skills.

The intergenerational model is premised on the belief that young people and adults bring different strengths to the table. As Hollis Watkins of Southern Echo says, “Community organizing is holistic. There will be times when things are best done by the older people, other times when things are best done by youth, and sometimes best done collectively. We know we can learn from young folk and young folk from elders.” Southern Echo's Board of Directors spans several generations and represents the collective wisdom of seven decades of experience. Within intergenerational groups like Southern Echo, young people determine issues of interest to them, and older people help bring that work to fruition.

Intergenerational work also ensures the continuity of social justice leadership in the South. One of the historical ironies is that veterans of the Civil Rights movement are reaching retirement age just as many young, talented Southerners are moving away in search of better opportunities—leaving a generation gap in community leadership. “People of the Civil Rights movement may be burned out, and now staff is older and concerned with who's going to take over,” says Paulina Hernandez of the Highlander Center. Youth and adults alike realize that communities must cultivate a deep, broad-based network representing a diverse cross section of the community if communities are to have the staying power and capacity to shape their own destinies. Many groups start with youth as young as six years-old, because they believe that youth must be reached early in order to develop cadres of social justice leaders. Southern Echo once targeted college students, but it has worked with grade school students since then. “Ninety-nine percent of the college students that come to work at Echo already have their minds made up about what they want to do with themselves, and making money

Adults and young people recognize that the long-term success of organizing and developing leadership depends on their ability to work across generations.

is a top, if not the top priority,” Watkins explains. Engaging young people in the real-life practice of liberation and community change demonstrates there is more to life than making money.

Despite these common aspirations, there are significant challenges to intergenerational work. Youth and elders bring to the table different experiences, vantage points, and motivations for organizing, and the belief that youth should be seen and not heard remains a touchstone of Southern culture. Parents may discourage their children from participating in youth organizing work because they do not understand it, or because they fear retaliation. And sometimes parents simply view civic participation as being less important than school or work. Rene Saenz of Esperanza Peace and Justice

Center in San Antonio, Texas underscores this tension. “There is not enough discussion about intergenerational differences—elders who feel disregarded and pushed out of organizations and youth who feel disregarded and not heard,” she says. “This conversation is not held; people agree to disagree in order to move an action plan.”

HONORING A CULTURE OF RESPECT

The notion of respect, especially for elders, deeply influences codes of personal conduct and social relations, especially in small towns and rural areas. Respect, in various guises, has significant consequences for organizing styles and tactics in the South. Though the in-your-face tactics central to some organizing styles (such as those inspired by Saul Alinsky) may appeal to young people seeking to confront those they view as oppressors, these tactics often narrow paths to organizing and communication—thus foreclosing long-term change. Roberto Martinez from Youth Action, a youth organizing support intermediary based in Albuquerque, New Mexico which runs a Southeast program, remarks, “It’s easy in big cities to make huge direct actions that can be very confrontational, but in rural communities, it’s very important to gauge what the community’s comfort level is about that particular action. You have to be sure it’s more about having community involved than it is about putting pressure in a certain way on your target.” Or as Hollis Watkins succinctly notes, “Outsiders lack a real understanding of how you win friends and influence people” in the South.

In many cases, language and respect are less a question of strategy than of tactics. Southern Echo’s Mac Epps argues that challenging others in the South therefore requires knowing “what you can and cannot say, or what should and should not be spoken.” Young people, he argues, cannot expect to garner the support of elders if they

emphasize that older people are out of touch or afraid to confront established powers, or if elders believe that youth are discounting adults' experiences. Trust is the foundation of community-based social change work. Allies must trust that the other is committed to social justice work, that information will not fall into the "wrong hands," and that change is possible.

USING CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND HISTORY TO EDUCATE, UPLIFT AND BUILD COMMUNITY

The majority of youth-oriented groups in the South place history and culture at the center of their organizing and development work. Music, poetry, drama and other creative forms express people's hopes and visions and arouse their sense of injustice. By incorporating culture, identity, and history, organizers are able to reach, engage, and retain people over the long-term, helping them connect their personal identities to larger issues and collective struggles. Groups such as the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center also search out terms and concepts that are indigenous to and resonant with specific communities. In many Latino communities, for example, the term "leader" is eschewed in favor of "animadoras" or animators—people who are able to activate and rouse the people.

For young people, cultural expression offers a way to celebrate the past, pay homage to a legacy of struggle—and also honor young people's present-day identities. Tunica Teens in Action, the youth component of Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County, recently held a Juneteenth celebration in addition to annual activities commemorating Black History Month. At the Community and Cultural Resource Center in Lexington, Mississippi, young people interviewed unsung civil rights workers in their local community—an oral history project that culminated in the publication of *Minds Stayed on Freedom: The Struggle in the Rural South*. At Atlanta's Youth Task Force, young people brought an infusion of African-ness and spirituality into the work. For many young people, this cultural aspect of organizing is a crucial step towards overcoming feelings of shame about being Black, a reclamation of dignity and self-respect. And across the South, young people speak of hip hop's power as cultural vernacular for dissent.

Arts and culture have been forceful outreach and education tools as well. Rethinking Excellence for the Advancement of Developing Youth (READY), a Southern Echo affiliate in Marion County, Mississippi, has created a series of plays that provide an entry point for youth to talk about their worldviews and the need for progressive change. In a play entitled "Who Killed Black Pride," the primary culprits are "apathy" and "lack of trust." With the support of adult allies, READY youth

TUNICA TOWARDS CHANGE

In 1990, Tunica County, Mississippi was the second poorest county in the nation. Since then, its rank has improved significantly, in part due to efforts like those of Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County and its youth component, Tunica Teens in Action, to push for more equitable funding for a chronically underserved, majority Black public school system. The coalition of parents, students, local school board members and other activists has transformed the previously all-White Board of Supervisors into a predominantly Black and community-friendly institution. In a major legal battle, they also halted plans by the Mississippi Department of Education to abolish the local school district and build a new school which, situated in a farther, upscale and predominantly

White development, would have been inaccessible to local students. In the past, the organization also negotiated with the county to allocate twenty percent of new tax revenue from an expanding casino industry for public schools, thus eliminating the district's debt in just six months.

Tunica Teens are already in the midst of another battle: addressing the pollution generated by a large grain storage facility across the street from their headquarters in a working-class Black community. But this one won't be easy. During the busy season, grain dust blankets the neighborhood, leading to widespread chronic respiratory diseases—but the grain elevator is also a crucial source of jobs for community residents.

reconceived the fable “Three Little Pigs” with Black characters to illustrate living conditions in Marion County and Mississippi's Black communities. Now they are revising “Mother Hubbard” in order to draw attention to the high poverty rate in their community. Young people at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center use puppetry and street theater, multi-media, and other arts to foster critical thinking and reflection about a range of issues including: local and global struggles, cultures and traditions, and local environmental justice debates.

Understanding and integrating cultural work will become increasingly important as the region's demographics change. In the semi-rural Southern town of Dade City, Florida, the offices of Farmworker Self Help (FSH), which organizes and serves primarily Latino farm workers and their children around issues including housing, worker rights, education and healthcare, sits adjacent to a small *tienda* selling imported goods from Mexico and Central America. The juxtaposition is a visual reminder of the rapidly growing Hispanic population in the area. In response to escalating racial tensions and increasing violence on school campuses, FSH developed a curriculum for its after-school tutoring program that focused on ethnic heritage and history, and explored how groups have historically been divided and pitted against each other.

BUILDING CAPACITY AND MOVEMENT: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Without an empirical survey of the region, no one knows the precise number of groups engaging youth in organizing in the South. Mississippi, Tennessee, Florida, Texas, South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia have the most visible and established groups. Mississippi leads the South in terms of sheer number and density of groups and networks.

But it is possible to infer some common themes. Most of the Southern youth organizing groups emerged in the mid 1990s, and as these groups mature, many are solidifying their progress by increasing organizational capacity, collaboration, and interaction. As the field develops, organizations find themselves grappling with common challenges: how to recruit youth and adults into the work, how to build long-standing institutions to sustain their efforts, and how to build relationships and bridge generational gaps. However, a lack of organizational and community infrastructure, along with deeply-entrenched isolation and divisions, are stubborn barriers to community building. While a weak organizing infrastructure is not unique to the region, Southern youth organizing groups are also playing catch-up with their counterparts in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast who have access to local, sustained, and substantial resources for infrastructure and capacity-building. Other regions also enjoy a culture that is generally more hospitable to progressive social change work.

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES: TRANSPORTATION, ACCESS AND SCALE

Youth organizing groups across the country tend to operate on small budgets—between \$150,000 and \$200,000 on average. In the South, these budget numbers tend to skew even lower, and even lower still in rural areas and small towns where people are faced with doing more with even less. In sprawling Southern cities, transportation is a persistent problem, and in some rural areas and small towns, commu-

nication and transit options differ little from those offered thirty years ago. While the Internet and technology industries have transformed white-collar work in the South, the digital divide is palpable in many parts of the South. The best Internet connections are likely to be found in public libraries where demand often exceeds supply, especially when school is out of session.

Moreover, convenings, conferences, and other meetings are typically held in urban centers, placing the burden of travel on rural and small town youth. For small-town and rural residents, even local transportation can be a drag. As one small-town leader points out, “You can’t just jump on a bus to get where you want to go.” In order to be interviewed for this paper, staff at Concerned Citizens for a Better Tunica County had to pick up and send home four young people from school. The Indianola Student Parent Group did the same for nearly a dozen young people. Simply put, shuttling young people around is a drain on both time and money.

Then there is the matter of space. For many youth groups, getting and maintaining organizational space is a seminal issue. As Appalachian Women’s Leadership project director Shelley Gaines explains, “There’s not much rental property in Hamlin, West Virginia because a few people own everything in town.” It is little wonder that the sparse infrastructure that does exist in the South for youth organizing often emerges from individuals and their networks. Young people and their adult allies find ways to create spaces and places to meet wherever they can—in churches, through local merchants or civic organizations, or even a room within a parent’s home. Tunica Teens, for example, grew out of meetings held in a member’s bedroom.

PIVOTAL ROLE OF NETWORKS AND SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

In recognition of the more fragile nature as well as the necessity and power of youth work in the South, technical assistance and support organizations have expanded the range of support, programming, and events dedicated specifically to youth social justice work. The Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network, Southern Echo, the Highlander Center, and Project South were all founded as adult-focused intermediaries, but each now has a youth component. These organizations have offered indispensable assistance and support for everything from base-building to campaign development to consciousness-raising. Southern Echo, in particular, has been instrumental in developing the community leadership and organizational capacity of groups not just in Mississippi but across the region as a whole.

These intermediaries have also helped youth and their allies break through their geographic isolation to build solidarity and connections across the South. As a result, youth organizing groups now share a nascent regional identity and perspective in progressive social justice work and movement-building. Among the convening opportunities that now exist are:

- Highlander Center's Seeds of Fire program, which brings together young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one for a week of political education and peer exchange each summer.
- Youth Action's Southeast regional gatherings of youth organizing groups.
- A Youth Organizing Training Institute organized by Southeast Regional Economic Justice Network, which consists of sixty organizations whose constituents are primarily the working poor, especially women and youth. The Institute grounds its participants—young people, ages fourteen to twenty-five, and their adult allies—in the realities of Southern organizing.
- Project South's Midnite School, a multi-day conference named after nighttime literacy gatherings of enslaved Africans preparing themselves for escape to the North. The School examines current political and economic trends with an eye towards developing coherent, multi-issue strategies for sustaining long-term change.
- A region-wide conference and strategy session organized by Critical Resistance South, a Louisiana-based group with chapters across the South and the nation aiming to build an international movement challenging the over-incarceration of people.

Southern Echo has also played a key role in promoting outreach and exchange beyond the South, encouraging Southern groups to attend national conferences and events, and inviting youth from outside the region into the South. These exchanges have already led to dynamic outcomes. Members of Community Impact, an organization in Nashville, Tennessee dedicated to increasing educational and economic pathways for youth, germinated the idea of a community tax service as a result of attending Youth Action's national conference in Chicago. After attending an event convened by another youth group, Tunica Teens in Action youth were so excited by "seeing other youth doing all the work" that they decided to organize their first Youth Summit last year, inviting youth groups from across Mississippi. They deemed the summit a success and will convene their second one this summer.

Intermediary organizations may also leverage the local work of a single, small organization for wider scale impact through networking, coordinated organizing efforts, and statewide campaigns. Since 1996, Southern Echo has led statewide challenges to school financing formulas, teacher quality and school construction through the formation of the Mississippi Education Working Group (MEWG), a broad-based coalition of fourteen grassroots organizations representing twelve rural districts around the Delta region. The organization has also pioneered statewide work to challenge redistricting schemes.

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING: DIFFICULT BUT PROMISING

The concerns of young people in the South are similar to those of peers around the country: inadequate economic opportunity, substandard schools, racial profiling, harsh disciplinary policies, and environmental degradation. Despite the daunting challenges youth in social justice organizations face, they are drawing on the South's unique assets—its legacy of brave resistance, strong sense of community, and rich culture and heritage—to create newfound hope and opportunity. They are using strategies shaped by previous generations and from other parts of the country to change policies and reform systems while adapting them to meet the exigencies of local communities—residents' personal needs, cultural codes, and the customs of local communities. Given the history of political exclusion and repression that still permeates the South, many community organizing efforts are working to restore in people a fundamental capacity to dream and envision a different future. Liberating individuals from “plantation mentalities” is not just a prerequisite to organizing for policy reform, but a goal in itself.

Young people in the South are vocalizing and practicing collaboration in unprecedented ways. They strongly believe in the need to develop connections that empower institutions and communities—yet they insist that these goals must be grounded in long-term commitments to local communities. Even though young people often struggle with their geographic isolation, their vision of justice far exceeds the county line. Thinking globally and acting locally, young people in the South have a sense of solidarity with the struggles of different communities elsewhere in America and around the globe. But solidarity depends on the continued support of networks and intermediaries which, as trainers and conveners of isolated organizations, expand the reach of single organizations by offering chances to collaborate with others and scale up their own operations.

As youth organizers in the South continue to tackle the barriers of race, class and language, and as they build cross-generational community power, we believe that these social justice activists and their adult allies will ultimately deepen and widen

their influence on national politics and regional economic growth. With the right support, their struggles, like the struggles of those who came before them, will transform the way our nation thinks about democracy, freedom and social justice.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Funding for efforts by young people to respond to the shifting dynamics and persistent problems in the New South will be crucial in deciding the stability and health of the overall region. Indeed, investing in the South is essential to mending trust in our political system nationwide. Funders who want to support youth organizing in the South should take heart in the abiding commitment these young people have to the work. Across the board, youth organizing groups in the South share a conviction that change is possible, and they have the energy, imagination, and programmatic flexibility necessary to meet the challenges before them. But they also have profound financial and technical assistance needs. Based on our research, we offer several recommendations to strengthen youth organizing efforts across the region. The strongest theme that emerged from our research is remarkably simple: young people and their adult allies want funders to bear witness—to directly experience and see the conditions and experiences of Southern youth. The rest will flow from there.

- **Talk with local organizations.** Although funders and local groups share common goals, they often speak a different language. Spend time with the young people in their communities to experience what is involved in getting eight young people to a meeting, what their schools are like, or why they fear certain things. Understand the categories and concepts they use to describe their work.
- **Keep in mind that the work in the South is gradual and that progress and scale may look different from that of other parts of the country.** Funders should consider long-range financial and technical support in the neighborhood of three-to-seven years, rather than in the typical one or two year increments. This support should help groups develop community leadership and achieve policy victories.
- **Consider community relationship building, consciousness-raising, and community empowerment efforts as part of a continuum of community organizing work.** These strategies are part of a long-term approach to rebuilding community fabrics. Understand that short-term campaigns and direct action may not always be the logical primary strategies.

- **Support relationship building, networking, and peer exchanges.**
Exchange and dialogue are especially important between adults and youth as they seek to bridge communication, share strategies, and build solidarity.
- **Tailor funding strategies to the different contexts throughout the South.**
Isolated or destitute rural areas may require support in the form of technology and transportation, while more economically viable rural areas and small towns may be able to build off existing resources such as public libraries or workforce development programs.
- **Support cultural work as an organizing tool,** particularly when it breaks down existing attitudes that inhibit young people from thinking about broader community change, and when it connects them to elders and possibly overlooked traditions.

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www.cafesc.org

Center for Community Action
123 West 4th Street
Lumberton, NC 28358
910-739-7851

Citizens for Quality Education
109 Swinney Lane
Lexington, MS 39095
662-834-0080

Community Culture and Resource Center
P.O. Box 784
Lexington, MS 39095
601-834-3528

Community Impact!
211 North 11th Street
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Critical Resistance South
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New Orleans, LA 70179-1213
504-837-5348
www.criticalresistance.org

Esperanza Peace and Justice Center
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Farmworkers Self Help
37240 Lock Street
Dade City, FL 33523
352-567-0200

Highlander Research and Education Center
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Indianola Student Parent Group
103 Curtis Street
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662-887-4232

Jacksonville Area Sexual Minority Youth Network
P.O. Box 380103
Jacksonville, FL 32205
904-389-3857
www.jasmyn.org

Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
2920 Reynolda Road
Winston-Salem, NC 27106
336-748-9222
www.mrbf.org

North Carolina Lambda Youth Network
115 Market Street
Durham, NC 27701
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People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources (PODER)
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