

The logo consists of two overlapping, upward-curving arcs. The inner arc is dark teal, and the outer arc is a lighter, vibrant green. They are centered at the top of the page.

SOUTHERN
ECONOMIC
ADVANCEMENT
PROJECT

Report by Sarah Beth Gehl, PhD

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Listening to Southern Nonprofits

Summary of Findings from 2019 Listening Tour

ABOUT THE SOUTHERN ECONOMIC ADVANCEMENT PROJECT (SEAP)

SEAP is your partner and resource. We amplify the efforts of existing organizations and networks that work toward broadening economic power and building a more equitable future.

Broadening economic power brings attention to how race, class and gender intersect social and economic policy in the South. We explore policy ideas designed to directly address these connections. SEAP focuses on 12 Southern states and marginalized/vulnerable populations within the region and is a fiscally sponsored project of the Roosevelt Institute.

The Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP) began in March 2019 with the aim of filling gaps in state and local policy research in the South. We wanted to ensure our work would be useful to existing efforts as we planned our research agenda. Thus, we embarked on listening sessions with nonprofit organizations in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina as well as one-on-one conversations with regional and national allies, asking these three questions:

1. What are the top economic security challenges in your community?
2. What are the top challenges for organizations working within your policy area?
3. What are solutions or room for growth in the policy infrastructure?

In all, our conversations included more than 60 organizations regionally and nationally. They included statewide policy and advocacy organizations, local direct service organizations, small town organizers, grassroots groups, faith-based coalitions, funders, and national think tanks. Within economic security, these organizations cover a wide array of issues, including housing, wages and work, youth development, agriculture, rural development, small town community development, finance, and more.

We offer this brief to lift up the voices of nonprofit leaders working in the area of economic security in the South. **We remain committed to filling policy research gaps; however, we now know that the need for capacity-building and network-building is equally great.**

Challenges to Economic Prosperity in Communities across the South

TRANSPORTATION. Several participants, both urban and rural, cited transportation as the number one barrier to economic prosperity for the people they serve. They noted a lack of public transit, a disconnect between transit and good-paying jobs when public transit does exist, the high cost of car ownership, and the far travel patterns of their clients, necessitated by finding jobs in other counties.

RACE, INCOME & INEQUALITY. In Georgia, we have long heard about two Georgias based on geography. In several of these listening sessions across multiple states, we heard about two communities within a single city—based on race. Housing separated based on race. Schools re-segregated. One participant said, **“People here feel the intentional weight of racism,”** and noted that it drives young people away. Development was uneven, according to participants across listening sessions, and economic goals did not encompass all residents. Issues of distrust in development arose, since **“institutions (that drive the economic development of a community) are not representative of the local community and have been part of decades of discrimination.”** With regard to income, one participant noted that clients are seen

as having a budgeting problem and thus in need of financial education, when in fact, **“these women can budget!”** The issue is a lack of reliable cash-flows.

"We don't have an economic agenda for all of the people of our city. We don't have one community working towards a goal."

HOUSING. Individuals face a range of housing challenges in renting, purchasing, and maintaining a home. The challenges of housing were a key theme in every state and every type of community (i.e. urban, small town, rural) and included a wide-range of barriers to economic prosperity, reviewed on the right.

CIVIC VOICE. Some voices are left out of the policy process. Participants noted several groups that do not have a seat at the table in many policy conversations—e.g. students, homeless individuals, those with disabilities. Barriers to participation include local government meetings that are held during the day, as well as child care and transportation barriers. One participant noted the need for face-to-face conversations rooted in dignity: **“We need to be on the ground talking to people. We need to meet people as humans with needs and expectations.”**

HEALTH. Although health was not a main focus of these discussions, it did arise in the context of individual economic security and community economic development. Participants discussed the economic damage of medical bills, including its effects on residents’ ability to purchase a home. Threats to Medicaid programs were seen as particularly damaging to rural hospitals and their communities’ economic prospects.

KEY CONCERNS ON HOUSING

- Lack of rental stock, exacerbated by natural disasters.
- Available homes that are “hidden” from some homebuyers based on race.
- Available homes, but residents not ready to purchase.
- Homelessness, particularly among youth accessing services.
- Denials because of past evictions.
- Domestic violence issues coupled with evictions.
- Lack of money in state trust funds.
- Lack of advisors for tenants.
- Gentrification.
- Retirement homes drive up prices and make area too costly for young people.
- Growing needs among aging populations.
- Inability to purchase homes due to medical bills.
- Inability to repair homes after disasters.
- Regional nature of housing challenges, but localized efforts. Small and mid-size communities do not have the services, so individuals with housing challenges must go to large cities.

EDUCATION. Similar to health, the focus of these conversations was not education; however, education came into the conversation frequently as a challenge for communities. There was talk of **“education privilege”** wherein communities lacked an imperative to lift up others. Re-segregated and/or dual school systems were mentioned as a challenge. Some school systems face **“grim prospects,”** with substitute teachers for science, for example, for eight weeks at a time because of teacher shortages. One participant described the need for a **“war to save public education.”** Lack of full funding, turn-around efforts wherein a school is not in better shape afterwards, and large privatization efforts were also noted. For adult learners, participants cited the need for lifelong learning as the needs of industry are always changing, saying **“We need to focus less on demand drivers and more on flexibility and general education savvy to adapt.”**

Additional issues discussed included:

- the brokenness of the safety net system;
- challenges of affordable child care;
- lack of opportunities for youth (e.g. leadership training, jobs, cultural opportunities);
- immigration, including college tuition for undocumented students;
- challenges of small business start-up, unless a person has stellar credit;
- disinvestment in communities leading to food deserts and bank deserts; and
- criminal justice reform challenges.

RURAL/SMALL TOWN CHALLENGES. Many of the issues noted above—housing, health, jobs, transportation—are experienced by both urban and rural communities. However, there was discussion of these issues for rural areas, in particular, as different than the challenges being faced in urban areas. The rural challenges identified included:

- Employment. Lack of jobs due to failing schools and lack of health care. Inability to retain workers without good-paying jobs, but also inability to attract good jobs without educated and trained workforce. Best jobs were seen as not accessible or not representative of the community.
- Rural sewage issues and environmental issues.
- Population loss. Significant out-migration with the mechanization of agriculture. Towns were once much more vibrant because supporting economy was upheld with farm labor.
- Lack of investment. Banks not investing in lower-income, rural, majority Black communities. One participant noted, **“We asked the community what they need? They said they’d love an ATM – simple things.”** Concentration of one person owning cores of small towns and either absent or disinterested. Additional community investments desired were affordable housing projects, sidewalks, playgrounds, grocery store.
- Stigma. Multiple participants said that rural residents are not treated with dignity and their communities are written-off as a lost cause.
- Disconnection between rural areas and power. Loss of leadership that was born in rural areas of the state. Lack of connections between urban and rural communities: **“We are atomized as a state.”**
- Additional challenges included natural disaster recovery, broadband access, healthcare access, and small business development, and economic dislocation.

Beyond nonprofit leaders, SEAP has begun listening sessions with Black farmers in Georgia. We will provide a separate report to lift up their challenges, ideas, and voices.

“If I had a wish list for my community--help people pay medical bills, bring good paying jobs and places to shop, improve education.”

Challenges for Organizations Serving and Advocating for Vulnerable Populations

RESOURCES. We know funding is an issue and did not ask about funding issues because we knew it was a given. Even without asking, though, resources crept into every conversation. To the right are comments on the near-universal issue of funding scarcity.

COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION. Participants consistently noted the need for better learning, sharing, and strategizing across groups both locally and state-wide. As one participant said, **“There are great things happening locally, but we don’t know each other. Also it’s a big state, so it makes advocacy hard.”**

Collaboration challenges relate to capacity, as coalition work takes time and resources. Geography is another barrier, particularly for smaller, local organizations outside the capital cities or large metro areas. One small town leader noted that they have to remind state groups to keep them involved and wish there were better methods of coordinating the non-metro groups in coalition work. Finally, leaders noted the difficulty of a move into new issue areas, the addition of new groups to the table, and a lack of trust among organizations.

SOLUTIONS THEY IDENTIFIED

- Hub that connects groups within a community or region of the state and shows models from other communities/states. Groups in three states discussed United Way 211 systems and the need for a policy equivalent.
- Opportunities to “get people out of county/city silos and help people get to know each other.” Several groups suggested the benefit of regional working groups on issues. Others noted the benefit of hiring someone to live in that area.
- Training on how to work across groups for cultural awareness.
- Physical meeting space for coalitions.
- Strategies for engaging partners outside metro areas, including seemingly simple fixes such as the quality of technology used for conference calls.

VOICES ON FUNDING

- There’s money out there to be acquired, but we have a lack of capacity to go get it. It’s hard to document the need and make the case when knee deep in the work.
- We have few multi-year funders, but these campaigns are multi-year.
- Grassroots groups in other states are better funded than those in our state.
- It’s harder to get funding for advocacy. Policy links are long-term, so we don’t see the direct result right away. It’s hard to fund that.
- Funders want to see something new. We don’t need new efforts. We need better funding for existing efforts.
- It would be nice to collaborate on grants with statewide organizations or with regional applications.
- When there is a match required, rural communities can’t access some grants.
- Money doesn’t filter down to us. We are not on the top of the food chain.
- Money goes to the same people every year.
- On a positive note from NC: We have good nonprofit infrastructure because of funders. We have statewide philanthropy more so than other states.

COMMUNICATIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND NARRATIVES. Expressing concerns effectively, translating policy and advocacy into the Southern context, and combatting misinformation were key communications challenges. There was a rural/urban communications challenge identified by participants in three states. One participant noted, **“there’s not a language for advocacy with many rural service providers. Racial wealth divide, for example – we’re intentionally talking about it, but it doesn’t always translate to rural counties.”** Religion, culture, and race were identified as making it **“hard to translate”** between urban and rural organizations.

Participants in several states mentioned the challenges of perceptions about the South. As one Georgia participant said, **“it’s hard to get people to think this is possible in Georgia.”** Similarly, in Alabama, several participants said that people outside the state, and sometimes inside the state, view it as a lost cause. Interestingly, a participant in North Carolina noted that her state is often viewed as the exception and ahead of the curve on certain policy areas, but that perception had the consequence of burying systemic barriers.

SOLUTIONS THEY IDENTIFIED

- Website for collecting stories in different policy areas.
- New narratives on shared vision of the South and the potential it has.
- Reframing of the safety net.
- Messaging and talking points for grassroots groups to educate voters on policies.
- A rural lens for communicating issues and a call to action for small towns.

“We need to create a narrative that respects and understands that people deserve to live in a place with good schools, good health care...all the things that offer a dignified life.”

TALENT AND NEW VOICES. Current leaders are concerned about the talent pipeline. Particularly in some small-town conversations, leaders noted their uncertainty about their replacements, as well as replacements for long-serving employees and volunteers. Participants included a mix of organizations, some who have long engaged in policy, some new to policy, and some starting to think about engaging in policy for the first time. They discussed a lack of understanding among many organizational leaders on

how to change policy, as well as a fear of reprisal. Additionally, they noted the need to shift local volunteers into the advocacy space rather than solely the direct service space.

One of the most striking comments—due to its frequency across organizations and states—was the need for additional training opportunities for elected officials at all levels. Participants noted that trainings could help elected officials have a vision no matter the size of the town, as well as an understanding of all of the policy levers available to them.

SOLUTIONS THEY IDENTIFIED

- Empowerment and engagement. Educate residents on government, root causes, and how to speak up to bring more voices to the table (e.g. millennials, youth, directly impacted communities).
- Training. Provide opportunities for leaders and employees in leadership development, data visualization, and mapping.
- Leadership development for elected officials, including preparation of local leaders for a big vision, an understanding of all the policy levers available to them, and development of an organizers' mindset.
- Get organizations to serve and advocate. Educate direct service providers on policy and how their work and data can affect change. Grow the field's comfort with advocacy.
- Roadshows of legislation around the state to get everyone on board. Paid lobbyists to develop relationships and enact complex law changes.

“Folks in power rarely sit down with low-income people and ask what they need.”

RESEARCH AND DATA. Particular areas of research requested included rural community and economic development, CRA and banking, healthcare from a jobs perspective, procurement policies, local budgeting, and job quality (worker cooperatives, labor protections). Finally, leaders in rural areas noted that academic studies and evaluations focus on urban areas.

AREAS FOR GROWTH THEY IDENTIFIED

- Progressive policies that work for small towns and rural areas that can be scaled up to state level.
- GIS mapping and data to track vital numbers showing who our universe is and where they are.
- Toolkits.
- Investment in organizations already doing policy research to increase capacity in staff structure.
- Small changes or tweaks to policies that would free up resources for clients.

Conclusion

We hope this overview of our listening sessions provides useful information for nonprofit leaders, funders, and policy researchers. SEAP has based our research agenda on feedback from these conversations and expanded our capacity-building and network-building services. For example, we offer microgrants to organizations wishing to engage in policy for the first time or in a new way. We offer policy support to harness data and examine models that work. Additionally, we connect Southern leaders to training and leadership development opportunities in partnership with other organizations. SEAP will continue to hold listening sessions throughout the South and lift up voices and ideas on how to build economic power.

Author

Sarah Beth Gehl, PhD is the Research Director for the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP). Her previous work includes policy development for a gubernatorial campaign, nonprofit consulting, and state-level policy research. Sarah Beth has taught at the University of Georgia, Georgia State University, and Agnes Scott College. She received a PhD in public policy through a joint program at Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University's Andrew Young School of Policy Studies.

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- Huntsville, AL
- Durham, NC
- Jackson, MS
- Montevallo, AL
- Montgomery, AL
- Raleigh, NC
- Savannah, GA
- Selma, AL
- Statesboro, GA

Additionally, we received valuable insights from national organizations that work in tandem with Southern partners on issues of economic justice. Thank you all for sharing your knowledge and time with SEAP.