The catalysts

People and place. Today, a quarter of African American owned farms in the country are in Mississippi and Alabama. Their owners have a wealth of know-how, but are disconnected from lucrative markets because their farms are small, in low-population areas, and without access to capital. They are “land rich and cash poor.” More than half of these farms earn less than $2,500 per year, and many aren’t in full production. But put to more productive use, they represent a real opportunity for the region.

Partners in place. Organizations rooted in the region recognize these assets are lying fallow. The Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative, MileSton Cooperative, The Cottage House, The United Christian Community Association, Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, Children’s Defense Fund and Tougaloo College have long worked to build a better farming system. Their common aim: improve the livelihoods of rural families in Alabama and Mississippi and sustain the region’s natural resources. In 2011, across two states and many communities, they began working together with local farmers as the Deep South Wealth Creation Network (DSWCN).

Support in place. Networks need care and feeding, especially in their youth. Two regional organizations—McIntosh SEED (Sustainable Environment and Economic Development) and Rural Support Partners—are helping strengthen the new collaboration. They bring local partners and farmers together to listen and think: What are our shared hopes and dreams? What is working and what is not? What do customers really want? What more could our farmers produce for larger markets? Working together, how can we make that happen?

Engaging young people to redefine farming as a path to prosperity

The demand

The starting point was on-the-ground research. DSWCN went to communities across the region to identify potential buyers in restaurants, schools and grocery stores. They asked: What products do you want? How do you want them delivered? What standards or certifications must we meet? Armed with this knowledge, they identified three “hot spots”—places where real demand was emerging for products they could produce.

Hot spot #1. Farmers in two southeastern Alabama counties, working with The Cottage House, started by getting fresh produce into the schools. Predictable, larger orders close to home could quickly add to their bottom line. But they also knew that children who eat more fresh greens are better able to learn. The desire to improve the next generation’s lot resounds throughout the Network.

Hot spot #2. Women farmers in Mississippi, working with the Southern Rural Black Women’s Initiative, marketed sweet potatoes and sweet potato greens to local schools, while Mileston farmers supplied peas and squash to small groceries throughout the region.

Hot spot #3. In western Alabama, The United Christian Community Association (TUCCA) helped organize local...
Knowing where there is real demand—and which farmers in the region can help meet it—is a great start. But actually moving product to market is another story.

So the Network mapped the pieces of the value chain they had in place—every step it took to get crops produced, processed, transported and sold into the larger markets. They looked for gaps in the chain, especially ones they could address better together.

**Putting it together**

**Gap 1: Get certified!** To sell to larger regional or national buyers, farmers typically need USDA certification that they are following best practices. This takes time and costs money, both scarce for low-income farmers. DSWCN coached them through it. In just one year, 22 Alabama farmers working with The Cottage House became Global GAP certified, the highest certification level.

**Gap 2: Produce more and better.** Supplying higher-volume markets means using the land as productively as possible. Experts from Tuskegee University helped Network farmers learn and adopt growing protocols and practices to meet buyers standards. This has increased crop yields by at least 40%, along with their value.

**Gap 3: Capture more value.** Farmers earn more for produce that is cleaned and packaged before reaching the buyer. Mississippi’s MileSton Cooperative turned an old gas station/convenience store into a facility to wash and bag peas and other produce before shipping. The local youth association is working to spruce up the facility. In Alabama, TUCCA secured space for an aggregation and production facility that now employs seven people. Equipment is being shared within the Network to enable expanded production at reduced cost.

**Gap 4: Find workers.** Producing vegetables requires lots of people—to plant, weed and harvest—and partners struggled to find workers to meet growing demand. The solution? Engage young people. Farmers got needed labor at a fair price and, as a bonus, local youth gained new opportunities in agriculture. DSWCN is now finding other gaps and developing ventures to fill them: trucking produce, operating a “Green Team” staffing operation that goes farm to farm. Another value chain is tapping the prison re-entry program to find willing workers.

**Mapping existing pieces of the value chain to locate missing links**

**The bottom line: Grow your own wealth**

So far, DSWCN has organized 50 small minority farmers and created entry points to wholesale markets. At the close of 2013, they will have generated over $250,000 in sales of collard greens, turnips, cabbage, sweet potatoes, and pink eye peas to high-end restaurants, schools, and groceries.

These early results for Network farmers have led them to engage a market developer who is now seeking larger deals and coordinating the “hot spot” value chains to deliver the goods together. As a result, farmers across Mississippi and Alabama are collaborating for the first time to grow and deliver cabbages for Sysco. Will Belle Foods, Walmart and Red Diamond be next?

For far too long, communities across the Deep South have lacked ways to control their futures. Now, farmers who have been living on the edge see they have plenty to offer that the larger economy values. Young people see farming with new eyes, as a way they can build a living at home. Organizations see the power of working together. The Deep South Wealth Building Network is building confidence that change can come.