

University of Mississippi

eGrove

Delta Directions: Publications

Center for Population Studies

1-27-2021

Delta Directions Consortium (DDC): Summary of Collaborative Pathways

Emily Broad Leib

Harvard Law School Food Law & Policy Clinic, ebroad@law.harvard.edu

Emma I. Scott

Harvard Law School Food Law & Policy Clinic, escott@law.harvard.edu

John J. Green

The University of Mississippi, jjg8@msstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/deltadirections_pub

Recommended Citation

Leib, Emily Broad; Scott, Emma I.; and Green, John J., "Delta Directions Consortium (DDC): Summary of Collaborative Pathways" (2021). *Delta Directions: Publications*. 35.

https://egrove.olemiss.edu/deltadirections_pub/35

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Population Studies at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Delta Directions: Publications by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Delta Directions Consortium (DDC): Summary of Collaborative Pathways

Prepared by Emily Broad Leib, Emma Scott, & John J. Green
with Additional Input from DDC-Affiliated Fellows & Partners



January 27, 2021

Introduction

The Delta Directions Consortium is an interdisciplinary network of individuals, academic institutions, non-profit organizations, and foundations that work together to create positive social change in the multi-state Mississippi Delta Region. Goals include improving public health and promoting socioeconomic development. The Consortium is not an independent non-profit organization but, rather, an alliance of partners committed to collaborative and innovative problem-solving. This document provides a summary of pathways for partners in the Delta Directions Consortium, with emphasis on substantive topics and projects. It should be read as a living document to frame ideas and approaches that will be adapted in response to the needs and interests of core partners and diverse stakeholders.

Our Approach

1. Partner across the academic/community divide and across disciplines to bring resources, research, policy, and potential solutions to communities throughout the Mississippi Delta.
2. Provide educational opportunities for students from Mississippi to do engaged scholarship and translational work and to educate future Mississippi, Arkansas, and other Delta states' leaders about challenges and opportunities to support the region, and bring students and faculty from local and national universities and colleges to add to local resources and to educate future national and global leaders about the challenges and opportunities in the Delta and other rural areas.
3. Disseminate, replicate, and expand our methods, findings, and successes, both within the Delta and to partners in similar rural regions, with an aim to impact national policy, programs, and discussions through publications, workshops, forums, and conferences.

Our Members

The Delta Directions Consortium (DDC) focuses on the intersections of socioeconomic development, health, and wellbeing, with a goal of bringing together the social sciences, public health, and law and policy with community partners to address complex issues.

Delta Directions involves a core group of individuals who facilitate and guide its work, many representing organizations and units within broader institutions. Members of this core team – currently representing the University of Mississippi Center for Population Studies, Mississippi State University Social Science Research Center and Shackouls Honors College, Harvard Law School Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation and Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, Community Foundation of Northwest Mississippi, and the Winokur Family Foundation – communicate regularly, identify areas of mutual interest, exchange resources across expertise areas, co-create materials to support community partners, and contribute to shared initiatives. Additionally, they collaborate with a broader network of partners and contribute time, talent, and resources to projects and programs with those stakeholders. The broader network of partners, including other university programs, community-based organizations, policymakers,

and foundations, continues to grow organically. Two DDC-affiliated Fellows help to communicate and coordinate joint efforts in relation to these efforts.

A longstanding initiative of the DDC is a fellowship program that connects an exceptional law school graduate to on-the-ground, community-centered work in the Mississippi Delta. As a representative of the DDC based in the Delta, the “Delta Fellow” helps catalyze community change through the creation, development, and management of interdisciplinary projects. The Delta Fellow communicates with stakeholder partners, coordinates projects for DDC’s primary initiative areas, and ensures that DDC projects are grounded in the Delta community. Over the course of their tenure, the Fellow becomes intimately familiar with community needs, assets, challenges, and opportunities, and finds ways to leverage the academic resources of DDC partners to support community partners in fostering transformational change. As a recent law school graduate, the Delta Fellow also brings a lawyer’s skillset to bear on the projects that arise during their term, thus providing critical policy advocacy tools to DDC initiatives. In addition to supporting the ongoing core project areas of DDC, the Delta Fellow proposes, implements, and evaluates a “signature project” during their term of service.

A complimentary fellowship was recently created to focus on public health - the Teaching Fellow for the Delta Scholars in Public Health Program. The Teaching Fellow is based at a DDC university partner where they are positioned to join DDC initiatives and lead collaborative efforts that advance health and wellbeing in the Delta through community engagement, collaborative research, and leadership development. This requires the Teaching Fellow to liaise with DDC leadership, university faculty, and DDC partners. The Teaching Fellow is a recent graduate from a public health doctoral program and brings public health expertise and experience to the DDC. Fellow activities include mentoring undergraduate and graduate public health students, teaching in the Delta Scholars program, and conducting Mississippi focused research.

Our Initiatives

Combining the interests and strengths of DDC leaders and their organizations with those of community stakeholders, the leadership team has identified four primary initiative areas for the next several years. For each initiative there is an explicit effort to: a) connect the various academic disciplines and fields that make the DDC unique and innovative, namely social sciences, public health, and policy and law; b) connect the academic partners with community partners and initiatives in order to conduct engaged research or share research findings in a way that can translate research and community needs into action; and c) build synergy around the opportunities for health and wellbeing and contribute to sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development.

The following areas make up the current DDC portfolio. Each topic is followed by a list of more specific ongoing or potential projects, which are led by at least one of the core partner organizations. While each initiative reflects longstanding DDC focus areas, we anticipate that they will continue to evolve as we engage with new stakeholders and the community landscape shifts.

Food security, food policy, and sustainability

The DDC has had a strong interest in and commitment to working on food policy issues since the earliest days of the coalition. This has included work on increasing food access, such as through supporting small

farmers markets; supporting local farmers and local procurement through efforts to increase farm to school programs; collating and presenting public access data to inform decision making (e.g., through publication of the Mississippi Health and Hunger Atlas); and bringing together stakeholders from around the state to identify key food policy reforms through launching and providing assistance to the Mississippi Food Policy Council. Recent efforts have also included work to address the food needs of people and communities in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic crisis.

Examples of recent and potential future projects include:

- Supporting the growth of community-led produce prescription programs, which connect individuals experiencing diet-related chronic health conditions or food insecurity to vouchers that support the purchase of produce; this could include enhancing the research base demonstrating the efficacy of such programs and identifying opportunities—through existing mechanisms or policy advocacy—to sustainably fund such initiatives. Several partners are already engaged in moving this work forward.
- Analyzing and supporting new efforts to increase food waste reduction and food donation in Mississippi; this could include providing fact sheets and conducting trainings on existing laws and policies regulating food donation and recovery; conducting research on reasons for waste specific to Mississippi in comparison to other states (potentially through surveys or other data collection); reviewing policy opportunities based on Mississippi needs and cross-state comparisons; and modeling impact of policies in Mississippi.
- Continuing to engage in efforts to address food access and access to nutritious foods, through analysis of specific food access barriers and identification of programmatic and policy solutions to address them. Collaborative work on food insecurity and food assistance services in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is illustrative.
- Supporting procurement practices by state and local agencies that increase purchase of local foods and foods that meet health standards; this could include analysis of state laws and comparison to cutting edge procurement standards by other states and localities.
- Supporting ongoing local and state food policy development; this could include connections between state and local policy coalitions, fostering connections between food policy councils in Mississippi and other southern states, and hosting training and technical assistance sessions.

Environmental health and social determinants of health

DDC lead partners have experience in a range of environmental health and social determinants of health research projects and supporting community partners working on these issues. This includes work on topics such lead testing of community water, increasing transportation options in the Mississippi Delta, analysis and promotion of best practices in asthma treatment, highlighting factors influencing poor birth outcomes, developing strategies for supporting breastfeeding, and addressing health across the life course, among others.

Examples of recent and potential future projects include:

- Working to support best practices in children’s blood lead level testing and treating elevated lead levels in community water sources; this can include work addressing the outcomes of pilot community testing, scaling up community testing practices, and analyzing legal liability and potential policy changes to address this ongoing risk.

- Addressing water access, quality, and affordability; this could include an examination of the local, regional, and state water resources and analysis of opportunities to strengthen water quality and access across rural water districts.
- Analyzing application of new technology to support transportation options for rural communities in the Mississippi Delta; this could include discussion of potential public-private partnerships to use existing and new technology as well as public support to provide transportation to work, grocery stores, health appointments, and other daily needs.
- Pursuing improvements in asthma treatment and prevention; this could include analysis of asthma risk factors and opportunities to support practices that reduce asthma such as through incentives to promote better housing materials and updates, more responsible use of pesticides and herbicides, and other asthma risk factors.
- Conducting research and identifying policy recommendations for infrastructure development to support rural areas, addressing issues of food, water, transportation, and broadband communication infrastructures, among others.

Health care access

Access to health care resources and coverage of those resources poses an ongoing burden for Delta residents. This includes both lack of rural health clinics and closure of rural hospitals, as well as challenges with health care coverage, balance billing issues that lead to medical debt, lack of coverage for particular healthcare needs or medications, such as in the mental health arena, and other community challenges.

Examples of recent and potential future projects include:

- Improving Medicaid coverage through avenues such as analysis of Medicaid expansion opportunities and responding to efforts to reduce access (e.g., through state waivers to increase work requirements on Medicaid access).
- Developing and promoting policies to increase presumptive eligibility for Medicaid, such as for pregnant women, so they can access prenatal health care earlier to maximize the health benefits for mothers and babies.
- Supporting efforts to address balance billing in Mississippi, whereby patients are sent surprise medical bills after treatment, leading to medical debt and ongoing financial and credit issues.
- Supporting efforts to increase awareness of and support for breastfeeding as an avenue to increase population health; this can include ongoing work to support policies that make breastfeeding more possible.
- Promoting paid leave policies as an avenue to ensure residents are able to take the needed leave to care for themselves and others in times of illness or disability, while still retaining their jobs.
- Analyzing opioid addiction treatment programming and policy; this could include analysis of programming working in other states that could best support Mississippi populations, looking at policy opportunities to address opioid addiction that best support those recovering, and analysis of other opportunities to reduce opioid impacts.
- Collaborating with nonprofits, foundations, and state agencies to address issues ranging from maternal-child health to aging through innovative strategies, such as home visiting and telehealth programs.

Access to and greater use of publicly available data and research to inform decision making

Accurate, timely, and accessible data are critical to addressing health, wellbeing, and socioeconomic development issues, and the DDC partners are committed to research-informed approaches to influencing policy and practice. Bringing together diverse methodological approaches, technical expertise, and a community-based framework, partners can work to fill several areas of need.

Examples of recent and potential future projects include:

- Supporting outreach, education, and promotion of the 2020 Decennial Census to improve data accuracy and data utilization, such as work with Kids Count on areas with undercounted children (Mississippi YOU Count Initiative) and the Southern Rural Development Center (Raising Rural Voices Initiative).
- Providing education and technical assistance for people to use vital records, American Community Survey (ACS) data, and population estimates/projections to inform community and regional development planning and evaluation, and advocacy for data access and leadership.
- Providing education and technical assistance for people to use Census of Agriculture data to inform local and regional food system development planning and evaluation.

Our Community Impact

DDC strives to bring about transformative change through cross-disciplinary collaborations rooted in the Delta community. Our primary initiative areas track the issues where one or more of our lead DDC partners have expertise, interest, and history of engagement. Working across these areas enables us to draw on that experience and instigate interdisciplinary research that leads to ideas, insights, and potential solutions that might not have been realized without taking this multi-lens approach. Further, by maintaining close relationships with community partners and incorporating them at each stage of our projects – not only as subjects of our work, but as leaders, influencers, co-creators, and active participants – we ensure our projects are responsive, relevant, and impactful. These united efforts translate to positive social change and important learnings that can – and already have – influence(d) local and state policy to promote better socioeconomic and health outcomes. By building the research base, sharing learnings, working with community leaders, evaluating policy opportunities, and supporting community advocacy, the DDC has and will continue to promote sustainable development in the Mississippi Delta.

DDC partners meet annually to identify the top issues within each category for joint work in the upcoming year, update the list with new projects, and add or modify the primary initiative areas. While each partner still engages in other related projects, including ongoing work from previous years, we identify one or several joint topic(s) each year for shared analysis and work. Crucially, the Delta Fellow helps with coordination across academic partners and with community partners on these core initiatives each year. The Delta Fellow also sources smaller projects from the community that can be conducted by individual DDC partners, smaller groups of partners, or by the Delta Fellow him/herself.

In addition, the Delta Fellow has the opportunity to develop a capstone project of his/her choosing during the course of the fellowship. This capstone project is developed by the Fellow and proposed to the DDC core members for comments and sign-off before launching. This approval process ensures that DDC partners have buy-in and engagement to support the Fellow in the project, and to support future needs

related to the project should they arise once the Fellow is finished with his/her tenure. The Fellow's project proposal includes a specific timeline and goals for completion by the end of his/her tenure.

In addition to the DDC partners working together on the primary projects each year – and as described further below – we incorporate students and fellows from our own programs in this work. This not only brings resources to the work, but also helps to support interdisciplinary learning and experience across our institutions. Moving forward, to further improve interdisciplinary collaboration and education, we aim to host periodic video and meetings/classes with students from all the schools throughout the year to share updates on the projects and foster a sense of a collaborative community across our programs.

Our Students

As a consortium whose lead partners include academic institutions, we are committed to the important project of engaging and educating our students and junior faculty on the challenges and opportunities facing the Delta region, the struggles facing rural areas more broadly, and the possibilities that emerge from cross-disciplinary partnership in addressing these challenges. We engage jointly in several endeavors to provide student engagement opportunities, most notably:

- **Harvard Law School Mississippi Delta Project:** This is a student-led organization at Harvard Law School that annually supports between 40-50 students in conducting collaborative pro bono projects to support DDC partners and community partners in the Delta region. DDC assists with developing projects, reviewing student drafts, and supporting regional engagement needed to make those projects impactful.
- **Delta Scholars:** Seeking to address issues of systemic justice and community wellbeing impacting Mississippi and the Delta region specifically, the Delta Scholars program challenges high-achieving, full-time college students to pursue positive social change in their communities and the entire state. This program is an annual training and network-building initiative that incorporates instruction from the various academic disciplines across the DDC partner institutions to enrich student understanding of the Mississippi Delta's unique history and equip students with analytical tools for promoting community development. This initiative is hosted by the Mississippi State University Shackouls Honors College, with strong support and engagement from all of the DDC partners, and consists of a two-week intensive summer program in Mississippi followed by a fall trip and educational opportunity hosted at Harvard University.
- **Collaborations with state and local organizations:** Consortium university partners are committed to supporting community partners by providing students with community engaged learning opportunities that benefit host organizations and satisfy degree requirements for field practice. For instance, Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health students have partnered with non-profit community organizations to research and produce policy briefs, reports, and publications focused on child health and wellbeing. Products provide public health leadership with priorities, evidence-based best practices, and proposals for policy in the state.
- **Society and Health Academic Programming:** Part of the University of Mississippi (UM) Center for Population Studies, the Society and Health Academic Program engages UM students in outreach, research, and policy projects that connect the social sciences and humanities with law, policy, and public health through DDC activities and partners.
- **Spring break, intersession, and summer trips:** Over the years, students from our respective universities have traveled to the Delta region for engaged, DDC-led service projects during their

academic breaks. These trips connect our students with community partners and provide hands-on learning opportunities. Some of these trips have been, and will continue to be, developed and conducted jointly across schools, which enhances opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning and collaboration.

Our Influence: Dissemination, Replication, Expansion

While the DDC's work has always had at its core a sense of place, grounded in the Mississippi Delta region, we are also committed to engaging with similar regions and finding ways to disseminate and broaden our reach and impact. This component of the DDC aims to disseminate, replicate, and expand our findings and methods developed to address community needs, through three key methods.

First, we aim to disseminate our successes and help others replicate them by writing articles or case studies on our projects or successes in Delta region that help to advertise our work and show people how it can be done elsewhere. We share these findings and successes by holding the Delta Regional Forum, an annual event where we invite policymakers, researchers, stakeholders, and community members to come together, learn about our work, and exchange ideas with one another over two days in Clarksdale, MS. While the forum generally focuses on Delta-based initiatives in Mississippi, it draws participants and collaborators from states across – and even outside of – the Delta region. Additionally, our Regional Forum also provides a platform for emerging academics to share new and exciting research. The DDC is also piloting a Summer Visiting Scholar position that invites an academic with a research focus on rural socioeconomic development or health outside the Delta region to participate in a summer residency program and collaborative engagement with the DDC. The Scholar would enhance their own scholarship—by incorporating the Mississippi Delta community into their research or by using the opportunity for comparative analysis with respect to other rural communities—engaging with DDC partners on relevant insights and ideas, and participating in that year's Delta Regional Forum. While the DDC launched this effort in 2020, the COVID-19 public health emergency prevented its realization and postponed the launch to 2021.

Second, in addition to publications in academic literature, we publish white papers and toolkits for broad circulation, which we make available on the DDC website and our individual institutional platforms and disseminate through our relevant partners. For example, for many of our policy projects or analyses of potential interventions, we conduct scans of relevant policies or literature to help evaluate possible opportunities for the Delta region. Where possible, once using the data for our specific Delta projects, we publish these resources divorced from the Delta context or specific Delta recommendations, if the background research or analysis could be useful elsewhere.

Lastly, we aim to identify and foster opportunities to bring Delta voices, struggles, and ideas to the national level, particularly in discussions of programs or policies that will impact the region. Voices from the Delta region are often missing from state policy discussions, and this is even more true in the national policy dialogue. We aspire to inform local residents about national decisions that may impact them and bring their voices to those decisions where possible. This can include working with them to write letters or make calls to legislators, write or co-author blogs or media stories, or draft and submit comments to federal agencies on rules that will impact the region.