

SOUTHERN ECHO

Jackson, Mississippi

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop grassroots leadership across Mississippi and the Southern region. Southern Echo's primary objective is "to make the political, economic, environmental and education systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community" by developing strong community organizations that address these four areas.

Training and technical assistance

In its five years of existence, Southern Echo has designed and conducted 16 residential training schools, more than 125 workshops and more than 650 community meetings for people from across Mississippi and the South. The staff have produced 15 training manuals on topics such as: community organizing; non-profit organizational and board development; legislative, county and municipal redistricting; environmental racism; and creating a quality education system.

Environmental safety zones

Southern Echo is working with people across the state to identify and create environmental safety zones, where limits will be placed on the use of agricultural chemicals and other environmental hazards. Many community people believe the misuse of agricultural chemicals and the spraying of fields surrounding churches, schools and homes is a primary cause of the high incidence of cancer, disease, and developmental disabilities in poor and African-American communities. Forty young people from seven Delta counties attended a recent training conference to learn more about environmental degradation and how to build support for the environmental safety zone concept.

In September 1995, Southern Echo will hold its third residential school on fighting environmental racism. The three-day program will be attended by young people, public officials and community activists from around the region. The curriculum helps people understand the hazards of agricultural chemicals and other pollutants, the ways that these substances move through an ecosystem, and how local zoning policies can be used to protect the community. Participants learn through hands-

on activities that "there are difficult issues to balance when doing a zoning plan, but that they have the capacity to understand the issues and develop policies that are responsive to the needs of the environment and the community."

Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Communities

Since its beginning, Southern Echo has worked with small farmers, who cannot compete effectively against large plantations, to help them move toward diversification through alternative crops produced

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by organic and sustainable agriculture practices. Southern Echo has also participated in the region-wide economic justice network. More recently, Southern Echo's members have pushed the organization into new areas of economic development.

Southern Echo is currently working with a federally designated Empowerment Zone (EZ) and three different Enterprise Communities (EC) covering a total of 15 counties in the Mississippi Delta to plan economic development "from the bottom up." Southern Echo is helping to design the process of bringing the communities together over the next 6 months. One goal is to assess what resources are available in the different counties, and what "home-grown" businesses and cottage industries can be developed from within based on available skills. Another goal is to develop value added industries, such as sawmills to process the lumber from Mississippi tree farms. Southern Echo is also hosting

meetings of regular and injured workers from the many catfish and poultry plants in the region to plan ways to improve the work environment in the industry.

Intergenerational model

The organization places a special emphasis on the inclusion of young people on an equal basis as adults. Young people are represented on Southern Echo's board, participate in projects with adults and elders, and run their own youth-led projects. Youth are involved in the entire organizational process, not only doing the work, but defining what work should be done and critically evaluating the results.

This intergenerational model is at the heart of Southern Echo's work and flows from the experiences of the organization's founders. Co-Director Leroy Johnson recalls first meeting Southern Echo's President, Hollis Watkins, in 1963. Johnson, then 5 years old, was brought by his father to a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee meeting in Holmes County at which Watkins, then 21 years old, was speaking.

The intergenerational process ties communities together, as generations learn about each other and we recreate ourselves. How do we continue that process? Those linkages remain a vital part of the ongoing struggle for justice."

History

Southern Echo began in 1989 when the three founders, who were working for different organizations, realized that communities were constantly bringing them together to provide training. Hollis Watkins came from the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, Mike Sayer from the Center for Constitutional Rights' Voters Rights Project in Greenville, and Leroy Johnson from the Rural Organizing and Cultural Center in Lexington.

The organization's board is composed of Mississippi residents who are active in their communities. In the past, Southern Echo depended heavily on volunteers and in-kind donations from the community, such as meeting rooms and office space. Only in 1993, after establishing a solid track record, did Southern Echo finally acquire grant money to open its own office. Southern Echo's budget this year is \$250,000.

Obtaining resources and fighting racism

Obtaining enough resources to do the level of work requested has been a major challenge. Johnson notes, "The more successful you are, the more you get pulled to

do. Meanwhile, funders think non-profits should be able to take \$100,000 and hire twenty people. We're expected to do more with less than other folks do with plenty." The organization has forged partnerships with a number of foundations as "allies." The current goal is to develop more broad-based financial support, focusing on operational support rather than project-driven grants, through an extensive membership drive in grassroots communities in Mississippi.

Another major barrier the organization faces is racism. Southern Echo works in collaborations as widely as possible, but there are limits to how much the organization can broaden its base in Mississippi. Johnson states: "We need to stop viewing racism as a barrier that can never be breached. The reality is that we can. But it takes hard work, being creative, and being honest. Truth is absolutely necessary." In the meantime, the organization focuses on building political power to dismantle historical and institutional systems of domination and control over black communities in Mississippi.

Sometimes Southern Echo finds resistance from adults in the community to "giving up the baton" to young people. Johnson notes that "established leaders don't always want to play the role of elders, teachers, mentors and advisors while handing the spotlight to young people."

Southern Echo feels that it overcomes obstacles due to the strength of its members. "Once the human spirit is activated in people, once you give them the tools and the strength to move forward, you can overcome the obstacles and problems." An example is Tallahatchie County, where recent struggles to obtain potable water and fair election districts for black communities mobilized people to such an extent that additional changes have been made: the election of the first black county supervisors; new, affordable low-income housing; a bond issue to create and expand indus-

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Scope: Statewide
Inception Date: 1989
Participants: Mississippi residents, local schools and students
Project type: Leadership development/training, environmental justice/equity, comprehensive community development
Methods used: Intergenerational leadership development, community organizing
Lessons learned: Leadership training helps people understand their own power. It takes time to overcome barriers and develop communities from the bottom up.

tries with higher-paying jobs; and two new public parks to which the black community will have access for the first time in the county's history.

—*Jobs & Environment Campaign*



UPDATE

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The Southern Echo program continues to be very active. Their 1997 budget has grown to \$350,000. To date, the program has completed 26 residential training schools, and held more than 150 workshops and 950 community meetings, while producing 25 training manuals. Their

grassroots membership drive now has 2300 members.

Southern Echo has continued to work with employees at local catfish and poultry processing plants. The state recently adopted new ergonomic standards for food processing workers. Southern Echo is involved in monitoring compliance with these standards.

Southern Echo currently is emphasizing efforts to encourage local communities to adopt environmental safety zones around their schools. This involves environmental monitoring and clean-up efforts and community organizing to remove or prevent the creation of environmental hazards. At the present time, more than 150 young people are actively involved in efforts to promote environmental justice around their schools and in their communities.

In one instance, their efforts resulted in stopping the construction of a hazardous waste facility in the vicinity of a local school. This was done in cooperation with an environmental organization based in the nearby state of Louisiana.

The youth program has been particularly active in the Mississippi delta region, where 65 students, in grades 5-12 have worked on a number of environmental projects, including conducting health surveys and collection of ground water, potable water and soil samples.

Representatives from the organization are working with a member of the Mississippi state legislature on proposed legislation which would create an 1000-yard environmental safety zone around local schools.

For the future, Southern Echo hopes to continue its work with local communities and residents to promote environmental justice and economic development. They will continue to emphasize, and make efforts to expand, their student environmental justice program.

—*Community Sustainability Resource Institute*