

## Matching Local Resources to Local Needs: Forestry and Community Development in Alabama's Black Belt

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### Abstract

We trace the history of technological change in the forest products sector and the impacts of such change on owners of small parcels of timberland. We explore technical and economic alternatives that can provide market access to such owners in the context of rural Black Belt Alabama, a region characterized by persistent rural poverty. We further explore opportunities to promote a linkage between scale-appropriate harvesting and processing technologies and local needs for improved housing and economic opportunities.

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## Introduction

In the “modern” world, the economy is a large impersonal machine the parts of which are distant, unseen, and well beyond personal and community control. But there are also local economies where people exchange goods and services in part or even primarily through barter or reciprocal exchanges, or perhaps engage in self-procurement of essential goods. In this paper we trace the evolution of the forest products industry from its origins as a mainstay of local economies to contemporary incorporation into the world system of capitalism and describe efforts to, in very small measure, reverse this trend. We present a preliminary report of an on-going project designed to promote micro-enterprise development linking local natural resources (timber) with local needs (improved housing). The explicit purpose of this project is to promote viable local enterprises in a set of four timber dependent, non-metropolitan Black Belt counties (Hale, Greene, Sumter, and Marengo) located in West Alabama (Figure 1).

Figure 1 here in text [not transmitted due to file size]

The irony -- and the potential -- of abundant timber resources associated with persistent poverty drew us to this region. Here we find housing conditions that frequently rank somewhere between abysmal and dreadful (Kennealy 2004). These houses are scattered across a heavily forested landscape where logging and milling of lumber are economically important. In a region that produces so much lumber, why do poor housing conditions persist?

The easy answer is that poor people do not own forest land and therefore have no access to the resource. More than half (58%) of Alabama’s forest land is owned by 1% of all ownership units, and this concentration is most marked in the Black Belt region (Bliss, Sisock and Birch 1998). Data from the 1980s indicate African-Americans in Alabama own only 4% of the private forest acreage (Rosson and Doolittle 1987). But this is not the whole story because there are a large number of owners with smaller forest landholdings. Over three-quarters of a million acres of forest land in Alabama are in holdings of less than 10 acres and, in the four study counties, holdings of under 10 acres total approximately 50,000 acres (Hartsell and Brown 2002). This represents less than 4% of privately owned forest land in the four study counties. This resource would be of considerable value if owners had access to a market. The problem is, they do not.

The first part of this paper will explain why owners of small tracts have no market for their timber, how our project will address this issue, and how this will lead to improved housing conditions. We will then discuss efforts to establish a partnership working to diversify this industry so that some small fraction of investment, employment, and production is tied to local markets and local needs. This partnership involves research and extension workers in rural sociology and forestry at Auburn University, a variety of actors within the USDA Forest Service, students and faculty of Auburn University’s Rural Studio in the School of Architecture, and (most importantly in the long run) two non-government organizations (NGOs) active in the area: the Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization (HERO) and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC).

## For Want of a Market

When European settlers first moved into Alabama, sawmills often were the first local industries established, transforming trees cut to clear agricultural land into building materials (Williams 1989:95). In the past, small scale logging and sawmill operations were widely distributed across the region so that an owner of a small tract of forest land was able to sell timber or procure building materials from their own land. Today, however, mirroring developments in other sectors of the national economy, small-scale producers have given way to more highly-capitalized producers. In the forestry sector, harvesting used to involve horses or mules, a

chainsaw, and an old truck which would haul wood to small local saw mills (Flick and Bliss 1994) (Figure 2). Today's harvesting operations have replaced labor with capital in the form of feller-bunchers, skidders, loaders, tractors and trailers (Figure 3). A single logging crew might operate equipment requiring an investment of \$500,000 or more. These capital-intensive logging operations are designed to harvest large tracts but are inefficient when harvesting tracts under 50 acres (Greene et al. 1997). Tracts of five, ten or twenty acres cannot be served by such logging operations, leaving the vast majority of all forest land owners with few if any options for harvesting and marketing their timber, or engaging in self-procurement activities designed to improve their housing or build a barn, shed, or fence line.

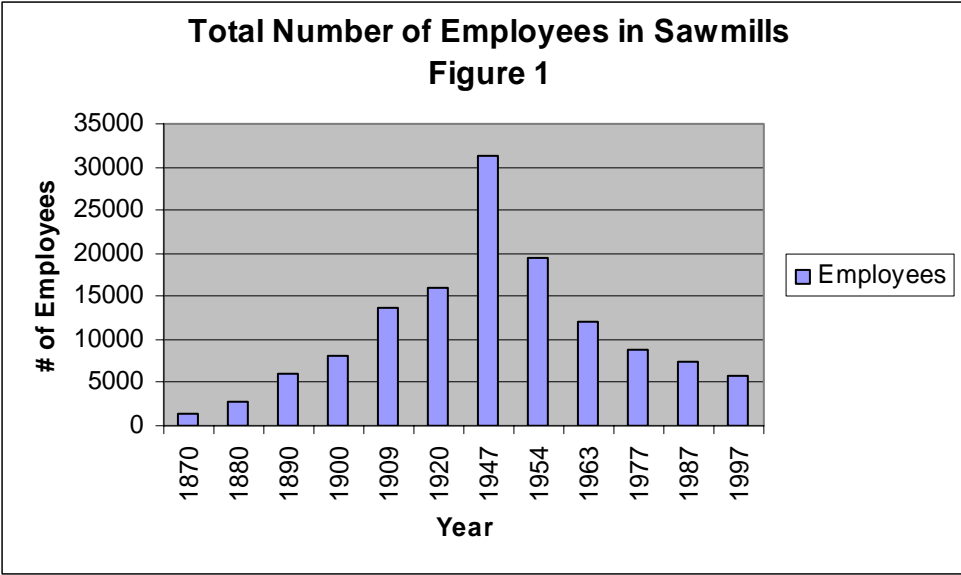
Figures 2 and 3 about here in text

Similarly, small sawmills that at one time dotted the landscape have been replaced by large and highly mechanized mills that require relatively few employees. The concept of a small locally owned sawmill run by a family that provides lumber to the local economy has all but vanished. A series of technological changes in saw design and power systems has transformed saw milling into a capital-intensive operation (Nassey 1960). Contemporary high-capacity saw mills use lasers and computers to maximize the value of each cut from each individual log going through the mill, greatly increasing productive efficiency. Where labor was once an important asset and necessity in early sawmills, it has been replaced with the modern machine.

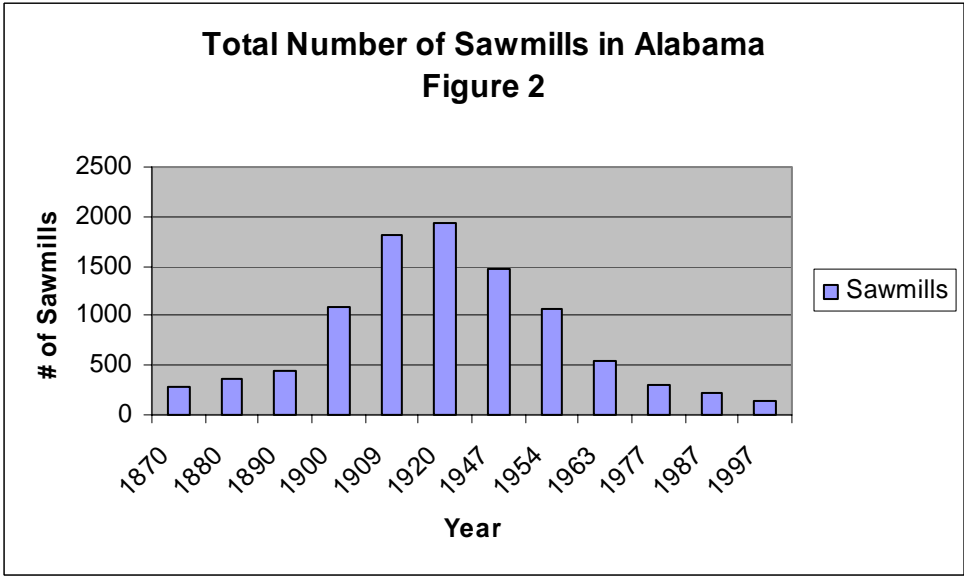
Employment trends for Alabama sawmills between 1870 and 1997 are shown in Figure 4. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, most sawmills in Alabama were small and served local markets (Manufacturing Census 1870). In 1880 Alabama had 384 reporting sawmills that were sawing 251,851 thousand board feet (Manufacturing Census 1880). Most of these mills were small and served local communities, but a few larger mills started to move into the area. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of mills (Figure 5) and employment in the mills increased dramatically. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, both numbers of mills and employment have dropped rapidly. However, production from sawmills in Alabama has remained roughly constant from its estimated output in 1920 of 1.8 billion board feet to 1.9 billion board feet in 2002 (Census of Manufacturing 1920; AL Forestry Commission 2002).

### **Recognizing the Need for Scale-Appropriate Technologies**

Small forested tracts are not well served by contemporary logging operations. The challenge is to identify and develop small-scale harvesting systems that can operate efficiently while meeting the diverse management objectives of non-industrial private forest (NIPF) landowners (DeCoster 1998). Small-scale harvesting systems based on horse, mule, or farm tractors may complement large-scale mechanized logging by filling the harvesting niches of small forested tracts, thinning or other low volume harvests, and harvests from aesthetically or ecologically sensitive areas. There are those in the forestry community that question the practicality of using animals in logging operations, claiming any interest in animals is just nostalgic wishfulness. However, results of a survey of natural resource managers in the northeast U.S. found that 58% agreed with the statement: "If there were loggers who used animals in my area, I would use animal logging over conventional methods in some situations" (Egan 1998). Toms et al. (2001) estimated there were 50 active animal logging operations in Alabama in 1998.



Source: Census of Manufacturing 1920, 1997



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A 1991 survey of NIPF owners in Alabama indicated 71% considered income from timber sales an important benefit of forest ownership. However, only 25% indicated this was the primary management objective (Bliss 1993). Almost 60% reported that non-commodity values (e.g., maintaining family ownership, protecting wildlife, and personal recreation) were the primary benefits of ownership. Poitras (n.d.) found that 43% of NIPF owners would not allow heavy equipment to harvest timber on their land because of adverse forest impacts (e.g., soil compaction, soil erosion, incompatibility with selective harvesting). In contrast, 45% of

respondents were willing to accept less money for their timber if low impact logging (e.g., animal logging, tractor logging) were used to improve their forest's future health and productivity.

The effect of tract size on harvesting costs has been examined. Cabbage (1983) reported that harvest costs for capital-intensive, highly mechanized systems are more sensitive to tract size than low-capital, labor intensive shortwood harvesting systems. Highly mechanized systems have higher move costs, meaning that it is inefficient for such operations to stop and harvest small tracts. Cabbage (1983) reported that shortwood harvesting operations had the lowest harvesting cost for tracts less than 20 acres. Toms et al. (2001) reported that 20 acres represents the median tract size for animal logging operations in Alabama, and that in this range such low capital harvesting systems may be cost effective.

Foresters have long been concerned with the economic viability of timber harvesting on small landholdings, believing that ongoing processes of fragmentation of forest lands over time will constrain future timber supplies (Sampson and DeCoster 2000). In support of this concern, DeCoster (2000) suggests that forest parcels below 50 acres often cannot be harvested through conventional forestry approaches. From a rural development perspective, the viability of forestry on small landholdings raises other concerns. Minority and limited resource landowners in Alabama generally have smaller than average landholdings (Schelhas 2000). Gan and Kolison (1999), studying minority forest landowners in two Southeastern Alabama counties, found a median forest land holding of 70 acres, with one-third of forest landowners having less than 50 acres. Making an economic return from forest lands may be critical to small landowners ability to retain their lands and maintain their economic well being (Zabawa et al 1990; Tufts and Zabawa 2000). But this requires greater attention from researchers and extensionists to the practice of forestry on small parcels (Crim 2003; Crim et al. 2003).

The technical and economic progress of the forest products industry has bypassed and failed to meet the needs of many landowners and communities. DeCoster (1998) and Greene et al. (1997) have recognized the need to better address the harvesting and silvicultural needs of smaller forest ownership units. Newly engineered small-scale harvesting technologies are being tested in Canada and Scandinavia. Some technologies have been developed as attachments for agricultural tractors. Others (e.g., portable mills) can be pulled behind a pickup truck and are capable of turning a felled tree into useable lumber. Our project is setting the stage for identification and development of efficient and locally-adapted technologies that will make it possible to selectively harvest trees from small tracts of forest land and turn the timber into valuable products. Moreover, these technologies need to be scale-appropriate, keeping in mind both the need to operate on small tracts and to be within the means of local entrepreneurs.

We believe that new low-impact selective logging operations and the availability of affordable portable saw mills offer the potential for landowners to earn income from their timber, provide employment opportunities for loggers and mill operators, and make available locally-sourced supply of building materials at affordable prices to improve substandard housing in the study area. We anticipate that some portion of the economic exchanges that will take place between land owners, loggers and mill operators, and purchasers of building products will take the form of informal exchanges of goods, services, and cash. Financial returns are important but not the only measure of success when considering the connection between economy and community. We will look both for opportunities for income as well as for the production of social capital and the consequent strengthening of community that may take place.

### **Project Genesis**

The initial concept for this project was developed by Mark Dubois in the School of Forestry & Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University and was developed through interactions with Conner Bailey in the College of Agriculture at Auburn. The overall goal of the project was to

identify and develop scale-appropriate approaches to harvesting, processing, and utilizing local timber resources. Among the anticipated end users would be people living in substandard housing, and the lumber produced could be used for housing rehabilitation. With this thought in mind, Dubois and Bailey solicited participation of the Rural Studio, a program of the School of Architecture at Auburn University. The Rural Studio is internationally known for providing unique educational opportunities for architecture students while serving the needs of the poor of Hale and surrounding counties. Our proposed work would fit well with this initiative while offering a concrete opportunity for work of the Rural Studio to become more integrated into the local economy through incorporation of locally-produced materials into student projects (e.g., housing rehabilitation). In addition to inspiring designs and improved housing quality for individual families, promotion of the use of local materials by the Rural Studio could help local loggers and wood processors establish viable businesses in an area desperate for jobs and income.

The next step was to identify and approach local partners in West Alabama, a region where the Rural Studio was based and where Dubois and Bailey had extensive experience. (The project area is approximately 3.5 hours drive from Auburn University.) Based on this experience, we approached HERO and the FSC. Both organizations expressed interest and support. Additional discussions were held with researchers associated with the USDA Forest Service working in the area of harvesting and wood processing. With this support, a proposal was submitted to and funded by the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station in June 2003. Two graduate students were recruited: Beau Brodbeck is a forester and will be responsible for examining opportunities and constraints associated with scale-appropriate technologies; Pat Kennealy is a sociologist responsible for assessing opportunities to match needs for improved housing with institutional and material (i.e., timber) resources. In addition, we invited a visiting scientist from The Netherlands, Rentje Tuinstra, to work with us and conduct an institutional assessment of the various actors at Auburn University, HERO and the FSC, and how these partners might best work together. In particular, she helped us better understand the interests and needs of our NGO partners in our project. Much of the following section is drawn from her report.

Between the time that the proposal was funded and the project was initiated during Fall 2003, both of the people we had worked with at HERO and FSC left their positions. During February 2004 individual meetings were held at HERO and FSC to explain the project and solicit support anew. A follow-up meeting involving HERO, FSC, and the USDA Forest Service was held in March 2004. A website has been established where project documents and papers can be accessed (<http://www.ag.auburn.edu/~cbailey/aaes.htm>).

### **Profiles of NGO Partners**

Both HERO and the FSC share similar ideologies, views and visions of rural development, but at the same time differ from each other in many aspects. Both classify themselves as membership organizations. HERO and the FSC also can be categorized as operational NGO's, whose primary purpose is the design and implementation of development-related projects. Both HERO and the FSC believe that gains are most likely to be made through collaborative rather than individual strategies. NGO's operating areas can range from the local level to the international level. HERO can be classified in the first category, as a community-based organization (CBO), which serves a specific population in a specific geographic area. HERO at this point is operating in Hale County, but wants to spread out to neighboring counties in the future. The FSC can be classified as a community-based organization as well, but it has a larger operating area than HERO. The FSC operates across states in the South ranging from Oklahoma to North Carolina. The rural training center in Epes, Sumter County, Alabama, serves all member cooperatives of this regional organization, but staff at this center work closely with limited resource farmers and others Alabama's Black Belt counties.

## **The Federation of Southern Cooperatives**

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives < <http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com/> > is an organization created during the Civil Rights era. It was 1965, the Voting Rights act had just passed and John Zippert, before he helped found the Federation, was a volunteer in registering African-Americans so that they would be able to vote. Zippert also worked in a small parish in Louisiana, a community that turned out to contain the highest number of African-American farmers in Louisiana. He learned about the difficulties they had to cope with, and started working with them on community issues such as trying to get better prices for agricultural products. This project led to a cooperative, which would later become one of the 22 cooperatives that organized the Federation in 1967. Today, there are over 70 active cooperative member groups across the South, with a concentration in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. John Zippert is currently the director of program operations at the Rural Training and Research Center, located in Epes, Sumter County in Alabama. The Federation primarily works with African-American family farmers in developing cooperatives and credit unions, to enhance the qualities of their lives and improve their communities. A primary focus has always been on land retention. The regional office in Epes is focused on outreach strategies and training efforts. Forming cooperatives as a way to organize economically is an essential part of the Federation's work.

The FSC has existed almost 37 years. During much of this time they have faced active opposition by white political leaders who were concerned that the FSC represented a challenge to the status quo. A federal grand jury investigation was allowed to drag on for years during the 1970s, causing some foundations to withhold support and nearly killing the organization. The FSC was able to clear its name and regain support from private foundations as well as to establish working relationships with various federal and (more recently) state agencies. These relationships are crucial to the success of the FSC because they translate into the one resource all NGOs need: funding. Although it is hard to get, the FSC does get a significant amount of federal money, because of their long existence, track record, their experience and proven positive impacts in the community. One respondent said with regard to federal funding that there is "a certain degree to these resources cannot be denied to us."

Funding limitations are a major problem for the FSC. During the 1970s and 1980s, the FSC was engaged in housing development programs in Alabama, but the absence of funding has made it necessary for the FSC to put further work in this area on hold. It is a very difficult decision to stop a program that is operational for an organization whose mission is to help people. On the other hand, it is also not easy to lay off a good staff of people, devoted to and experienced in their work. Once those people are gone, it is very difficult to recruit people who have the same dedication, the same skills and experience and the willingness to work in a very remote rural area, not to mention going through the recruitment and training process itself.

The FSC's main strength is that the organization works directly with people from the local communities toward goals they want to achieve. In using a participatory approach, the FSC is able to gain trust at the community level. Also, the FSC has a very stable executive staff, of which the majority has worked at the FSC since the beginning. It is an experienced group of people, who have been through all the ups and downs together over the years, they have grown together and as an organization. This group of people is a very strong, bonded, committed group that has taken the organization to its current level. Although this has been of great value to the organization, as retirement approaches in the next five to ten years for many of the current board members, the need to hire and train a new group of leaders is essential for the success of this organization's future.

The FSC has a long track record of working with farmers and forest landowners in Black Belt areas and is therefore an important partner in this project. For the FSC, working on sustainable development means trying to help people to organize in a way that they become self-

sufficient, and also creating an organization that will last beyond the founders and its original people. Owning land is considered by the FSC as one of the best resources a person can have. But forest land presents certain problems for African-American owners due to a history of mistreatment by loggers and timber merchants, who have either paid owners a small fraction of the value of their timber or defrauded owners of their property. Thus, in addition to the technical constraints previously identified affecting owners of small parcels wishing to market timber, there are problems with unethical business practices that make many African-American owners of small tracts of forest land reluctant to realize revenue potentials from their land.

The FSC also works with owners of what is termed "heir property." Such property is generally a piece of land inherited by all descendants of an original owner. This occurs frequently in the absence of a will determining how an estate is to be distributed. As a result, a given parcel of land may have as many as thirty owners, some number of whom may live in other states. To do anything with that land, for example harvest trees, requires approval of all owners. The FSC is helping people solve their heir problems by providing them legal advice on estate management and the writing of wills.

The FSC has made a commitment to working in the area of forestry and has hired Amadou Diop to be Project Director of the Forestry Program. This commitment reflects the understanding that much of the rural South, including the demographic Black Belt that stretches from the Carolinas through Louisiana, is heavily forested. Mr. Diop has expressed strong support for the project, and argues that "We need to use a participatory approach. If they don't feel that they are part of it, you won't see that commitment."

### **Hale Empowerment and Revitalization Organization**

HERO <<http://www.heroknowledge.net/index.htm>> emerged from a strategic planning effort made in the early 1990's by a multi-racial group who identified some important issues in Hale county that needed to be addressed. They applied for a federal grant, which was denied. But in the process of planning and working together, the group decided that the needs they had identified were so important that they should do what they could even without the grant. In 1994 this planning group formed HERO, which at the time consisted of about 100 members. One of the first grants they received was used to start the Family Resource Center. The FRC focuses on strengthening the community, creating opportunities and empowering people. HERO helps people to figure out how to solve their problems instead of solving it for them. The programs HERO offers are targeted towards the whole family, they range from baby care to adult educational services and include outreach services, workforce development, early intervention services, youth services, senior services, health services and housing programs. People are free to walk in the HERO office at Main street in Greensboro, and the staff will do its best to find the most optimal program for them, or refer them to the agency or organization they should turn to.

For HERO, maintaining an active membership base has been a challenge. HERO's many programs require funding, which in turn requires the writing of successful grant applications. HERO receives most of its funding in the form of federal and state grants, which carry with them very specific program requirements, leaving the organization with not much flexibility on how to spend this money. This means 'following the money' instead of following the community's needs. This is not necessarily a bad thing, or something that can be changed easily, but it does have consequences for involvement of group members. One respondent noted that "Its gotten more a business model in how HERO is operated than a community development model."

HERO has been operating about ten years, and staff turnover is high. According to staff and board members, this is the result of a continually changing organization. Since the beginning the organization has expanded and grown in staff and space as well as experiencing diverse and changing management requirements and job descriptions. Another consequence of being an NGO is that a lot of time is spent on writing grants for funding. In itself this activity takes up a lot of

time. Despite the challenges of obtaining program funding to meet the many needs of local residents, HERO has made a significant impact. They have established a strong partnership with the Rural Studio, which has lent its design talents to creating school rooms and a very open and attractive headquarters in downtown Greensboro, close to the Hale County courthouse.

HERO has expressed their interest in our project from the very start. Although forestry is not the first thing that comes in mind when thinking about HERO, they could play a significant role in this project. To HERO, a key ingredient to sustainable development is stronger public education. Many people in the Black Belt area do not have the education or skills to be self-supportive. A poorly educated workforce cannot support a strong school system. This vicious cycle creates a lack of hope and a lack of jobs, and as a consequence people live in poverty. Given this understanding, HERO is focusing its efforts in two broad directions: promotion of entrepreneurial development within the community, and community education. These twin foci reflects HERO's underlying goal of empowering people to solve their own problems.

To provide sustainable income for people, HERO looks at how this project can provide jobs. Three ideas have come out of this so far. Using locally-produced lumber, low-cost housing options might be expanded, especially for those able to self-procure building materials. Logging and processing of timber may generate employment. Jobs also will be created in building or rehabilitating existing houses. Additionally, HERO can help people market their products. People may know how to make something, but knowing how to promote it on a larger scale is a whole different story. HERO believes that an important aspect in changing this way of thinking can be achieved by helping people market their skills in such areas as basic carpentry, horse-logging, processing of timber, or furniture making.

For HERO, education is also a primary feature when talking about sustainable development. HERO would like to see forestry education in schools, especially in the two-year programs that some colleges offer. According to HERO these two-year programs are the most important source of workforce development at this moment in the Black Belt areas. For example, they could provide education on how to use sawmill equipment, which would make sure the use of it will be an ongoing process, a training cycle that filters back into the community.

### **Common Interests**

The project as proposed has a clear utilitarian purpose: transform underutilized resources into useful products. The initial grant from the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station is geared towards research and leveraging additional resources to support future research. We believe that opportunities in this regards are present both through private foundations and through various federal and state programs. Our partners have high visibility in certain circles. The Rural Studio has a strong positive international reputation, and has been featured in most major architectural publications. One of the founders of the Rural Studio, Sambo Mockaby, was given a MacArthur "genius grant" just before he died two years ago. HERO has been featured in articles of "best practices" associated with community development, and the FSC is nationally known as a defender of African-American farmers and a leader in the campaign against land loss in the African-American community. Our partners bring real assets to the table when it comes to attracting additional resources to support the core idea behind our project. We anticipate that in the next several years, HERO and the FSC will help support several local individuals who see opportunity for entrepreneurship in scale-appropriate woods work. For this to be a reality probably will involve some additional resources in the form of training programs, technology transfer, and perhaps financing. Almost certainly the individuals who adopt these technologies will not be able to rely on woods work for their sole source of income, at least initially. But we believe demand for their services exists. Toms et al. (2001) demonstrate that horse and mule loggers in Alabama have no shortage of work, and we believe linking logging and milling lumber

will be an attractive option for many land owners, especially those with limited cash income and who may be happy to split the lumber with the logger and operator of a portable mill.

Our NGO partners bring their own particular interests to this project. The FSC would like to develop a forest landowners cooperative, but is concerned about the willingness of the landowners to participate in it. They believe education is a key need and have developed a youth program to teach young people land management skills and the importance of being involved in the community. HERO, with its focus on education, could work together with the FSC on this issue, identifying young people who would be interested in learning these skills. In the person of Mr. Diop, the FSC has the technical capacity to initiate such programs, calling in additional support as needed from the USDA Forest Service, the Alabama Forestry Commission, or Auburn University.

HERO's strong interest in promoting entrepreneurship involves helping people market their products. The FSC is supporting a local craftsman who is making furniture and other items out of wood. HERO could work together with the FSC to market these and other future products, perhaps providing some additional training in entrepreneurial skills. What HERO and the FSC both find extremely beneficial in this project is that new contacts are being made. The first time these two NGOs had opportunity to interact came about through this project.

### **Differing Perspectives and Needs**

We would love to leave our readers with the image of some idealistic but practically-minded university professors coming up with the kernel of a good idea, that local NGO partners grasped this idea with both hands, and that we were well on our way to success. This image is not entirely misleading, though it is premature to use the word success.

Creating a workable partnership between academics and non-academics is fraught with multiple challenges. Academics tend to think in the abstract and have multiple demands on their time, few of which are relevant to people outside of academia. Exams? End of semester? Thesis proposals? Peer-reviewed publications? You get the picture. Those of us in academia often complain about our lot in life – relatively long hours, relatively low pay, putting up with ungrateful students, putting up with ungrateful administrators. But from the perspective of our community partners, we live lives of considerable privilege, not least because our jobs and our personal welfare do not hinge upon the success of a project. Our project provides funds for our graduate students to do cool and interesting research. And to travel to academic conferences and talk about what we have learned. Virtually none of the original funding trickles down to the community.

One thing that has become clear over the past year is that academic and non-academic partners approach this project very differently. In its initial design, developed in consultation with individuals representing HERO and the FSC, the project was designed without a specific blueprint of detailed actions and responsibilities. From the academic perspective, this made sense as we saw ourselves as moving into uncharted territory in the sense that no comparable project was known to us. Setting up detailed work plans made little sense. We wanted to explore, find out why there were no small-scale harvesting and processing operations, what were the needs and resources of people living in sub-standard housing.

Our NGO partners, however, have been frustrated by what they see as the vagueness of our proposal and the gradual pace with which our project is unfolding. Understandably, our NGO partners see needs which should be met, resources that need to be mobilized and, if they are expected to contribute to the project, something tangible for them to do and sufficient resources with which to do it. On the academic side, we want to study conditions first. Both positions make sense to those involved, and there is probably even some understanding of these differences. But the differences are significant and need to be addressed if our university-NGO collaboration is to be successful.

In essence, our NGO partners are in need of specific details about where the project is headed, what the ideas and expectations are, what the possibilities and barriers are. Clarity is key, and all partners need to be very clear about their expectations and interests to avoid disappointments that are simply based on general assumptions and mis- (or lack of) communication. While the advantages of collaborative efforts are in part the result of organizational differences, these differences can also pose a threat to success of the partnership. In this particular case, a primary problem lies in the fact that the proposal has been made by an academic team, written in an academic style, and submitted to an academic funder. Although the NGO partners in the project understand this, they find the proposal lacks the detailed directions that hands-on community-based organizations look for. These elements may not have been appropriate for the particular grant opportunity, which was clearly oriented to research. Despite efforts of the academic partners to contact NGO counterparts, in reality the proposal was prepared in the halls of academia and endorsed with limited input from our NGO partners. From the academic perspective, the proposal was not meant to be a detailed blueprint but rather to identify information needs that could be addressed through research before initiating a development project (i.e., actually introducing technologies and promoting entrepreneurial activity).

Academics are involved in research, writing, and teaching, with possibly some associated social activism. We excel in verbal and written communication of ideas to experts (colleagues) and certain types of nonexperts (students). For community-based groups, work involves frontline activities including face-to-face problem solving. Successful NGOs are practically oriented, taking action, while academics are more theoretically oriented, trained to enhance understanding through reflection and analysis (Bell & Delaney 2001). Looking at the history of the FSC, we see that it has been through some very rough times, fighting to overcome entrenched opposition and fighting to stand up for the rights of those who have been underserved for so long. This organization knows the ins and outs of developing and implementing projects through long experience and knowledge built up over the years. Perhaps we should not be surprised that our partners in the FSC are somewhat critical and skeptical about a project that appears “unclear” and “needs to be more specific.” What the FSC is looking for is an action-oriented approach, with future steps clearly marked in advance.

From the perspective of the academics who wrote the proposal, a blueprint would be inappropriate at this stage, particularly if it involved university people spelling out what NGOs should do and how they should do it. The academic partners see the current proposal as the starting point of a larger project activity which necessarily will be led by local partners. However, to the other participants it is merely seen as a vague proposal, not thought through enough, leaving the participants with too many options that are difficult to work on. So in spite of good intentions in fostering a participatory approach, creating a proposal developed from a team effort, the NGO partners at this stage have expressed need for a clearer project blueprint rather than an open agenda.

All inter-organizational relationships are shaped in part, at least initially, by previous relationships. (Kind of like dating?) From the perspective of the FSC, based on many years of experience, many organizations -- including universities -- are perceived to be interested in their own benefit, collecting data from the organization and local people, without visible returns to the community. Amadou Diop expressed some of the landowner's feelings: “They come and take our pictures, they ask all kinds of questions and we give them all the answers they want, too. But then they go back and maybe get credit for what they did and we don't get anything; we wasted our time.” So a legitimate question to ask is; “What is the community getting out of it?” Suspicions and doubt have been expressed about the thought of more money and time being spent on research than on the realization of the project.

In this particular case, the academic researchers created the project proposal and organized a first meeting with potential participants. So far we have taken the lead role (the source of initiative) in this project, but we have made it clear that in the long run local people and

organizations have to take over ownership of any successful project. From the academic perspective, our NGO partners' interest in our project is gratifying. At the same time, their interest in moving forward quickly is requiring adjustments in the timing of such project components as demonstration trials of technical components (e.g., portable saw mills).

The potential for success in our project will be determined by how academic and non-academic partners work together. All participants bring to the table useful skills and perspectives, but our operating strategies and even our immediate priorities differ markedly. These differences are not necessarily fatal, and in some measure might represent strengths. This will only be the case if the different partners communicate effectively and work towards strategies that are mutually satisfactory. We cannot survive "a failure to communicate" (Martin Strother in the movie *Cool Hand Luke*) because failure on this level would lead to unintended conflict and loss of cooperation.

Beyond communicating strategies, the project partners need to start working on attracting additional funding that would help support the active involvement of staff from HERO and the FSC. Current project funding is going to support graduate students at Auburn University, with faculty time "donated" at no cost. But this faculty time is supported by hard dollars from the AU budget. There are no comparable positions within HERO and the FSC. The next steps are to complete some initial research this summer and continue the search for funds to carry the project from concept to practice.

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