

THE MISSISSIPPI

Delta

(Part II)

a report submitted to the
National Council of Churches
by the

COUNCIL OF FEDERATED ORGANIZATIONS

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ONE man - ONE VOTE

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Report on the Mississippi Delta
Submitted to the National Council of Churches

THE DELTA: A PROBLEMATIC SITUATION IN NEED OF A REMEDIAL ALTERNATIVE

INTRODUCTION

In all societies there are individuals who are able to point out existing problems. In many instances, these individuals are also able to provide remedial alternatives as means of eliminating said problems.

Many of us are sensitively aware of the fact that myriad problems exist throughout the world. And it is also realized that not only are these problems legion in number, but also in type. There are economic, political, military, racial, religious, health, housing, agricultural, and educational problems, to list a few; but the list is actually endless. The people who work on these problems are, first, the people who are concerned about them. Moreover, the people who have the initial concern about particular problems are the people who have defined them as problems and have tried to indicate to others that there is a problem. In other words, a "problem" is actually only a recognition of a particular situation by some people who attempt to indicate to others that such a situation is a "problem" and consequently undesirable, thus calling for a solution.

The question then arises: What do the people who define the problem use as their basis to define the problem?

First, these indicators of problems have certain personal beliefs and values which indicate to them how a particular situation should be. Second, they make a critical observation of this particular situation to see how it actually is. Third, they judge whether or not the particular situation presently measures up to their view of how it should be. If it does not, a gap exists in their mind--to them a problematic gap. The problem thus is the existence of this gap, and the problem will persist in their minds until the gap is closed.

Thus, at once, it is seen that the recognition and even the definition of a problem is a purely personal phenomenon. And the trouble lies not only in providing a solution to it, but in some instances, convincing others that the "problem" is a problem. To put it another way, some people have an ideal that they desire to see met in real life. If it is not being met, in particular areas, a problem is said to exist in these areas.

There are several individuals and groups of individuals today who have observed the Mississippi Delta and have termed it a problem area. These persons have a two-fold task before them: convincing others that there is a problem in the Delta area, in order to get assistance for their second task of attempting to solve the problem.

TABLE I

POPULATION OF THE DELTA

	TOTAL POPULATION	MALES	FEMALES	NEGRO	
				MALES	FEMALES
BOLIVAR	54,469	26,562	27,962	12,751	18,912
COAHOMA	46,212	22,192	24,020	14,948	16,492
HUMPHREYS	19,093	9,311	9,782	6,406	6,894
ISSAQUENA	3,576	1,782	1,794	602	1,220
LEFLORE	97,142	22,439	24,703	14,426	1,588
QUITMAN	20,019	10,236	10,783	6,399	6,855
SHARKEY	10,738	5,170	5,568	3,550	3,919
SUNFLOWER	45,750	23,132	22,168	15,481	15,374
TALLAHATCHIE	24,081	11,794	12,287	7,475	7,925
TUNICA	16,826	8,292	8,534	6,563	6,752
WASHINGTON	178,638	38,075	40,563	20,212	22,885

RURAL POPULATION

	total pop.	white	negro
BOLIVAR	44,292	11,349	32,780
COAHOMA	25,107	4,812	20,236
HUMPHREYS	14,951	4,164	10,772
ISSAQUENA	3,576	1,176	2,399
LEFLORE	26,706	6,881	19,806
QUITMAN	18,447	6,562	11,871
SHARKEY	10,738	3,247	7,469
SUNFLOWER	30,036	11,780	27,141
TALLAHATCHIE	21,553	7,224	14,246
TUNICA	16,826	3,505	13,315
WASHINGTON	25,679	9,218	16,440

TABLE II

	white
BOLIVAR	7.4
COAHOMA	9.0
HUMPHREYS	9.6
ISSAQUENA	11.0
LEFLORE	10.5
QUITMAN	8.0
SHARKEY	12.0
SUNFLOWER	9.5
TALLAHATCHIE	10.2
WASHINGTON	6.6

DEATH RATES

	nonwhite
BOLIVAR	13.1
COAHOMA	13.8
HUMPHREYS	11.5
ISSAQUENA	11.2
LEFLORE	12.5
QUITMAN	11.7
SHARKEY	12.5
SUNFLOWER	10.2
TALLAHATCHIE	11.3
WASHINGTON	14.3

In order to indicate what the people who feel the Delta is a problem area have in mind, it might be best to indicate the problematic gap, i.e., first point out what the people feel the situation should be, and second, examine briefly the existing situation and thus expose the difference between the two.

THE CRITERIA FOR JUDGEMENT

The people who are concerned about the Delta have a basically humanist orientation. In general they are people who are aware of the fact and agree with the conclusion of the Conference on Economic Progress that it takes, annually, \$4,000 "to place the multi-person family above poverty in the American context today." (1961 report) They are people who feel that housing in contemporary America can be considered adequate only if the house has running hot and cold water and toilet facilities within the house. They are people who want to see certain minimum dietary levels achieved in terms of the quality of the diet (nutritional intake) as well as the quantity of the diet (caloric intake). They are people who set certain health standards and gauge the health levels of people by mortality rates and incidence-of-disease rates; realizing that when death rates are excessively high, especially infant mortality rates or the incidence of communicable diseases among children, health standards are not being met. They are people who will insist that the provision of an adequate education for all is a responsibility that no society intent on progress can shirk. They are a people who stand firmly opposed against raw and naked exploitation of man by man. They are people with democratic principles who believe in representative government and, consequently, advocate "one man--one vote" for every man. Lastly, they realize that unemployment and underemployment are factors that give rise to many situations to which they are opposed.

From the above it is possible to discern how some people who are concerned about the Delta feel certain things should be. In a sense, one can call this their ideal. It is largely a socio-politico-economic ideal. But because the elements are so inescapably related to the kinds of lives people live, it is best to call it a welfare ideal. Some people who are concerned about the Delta know that it is not being met and they are desirous of action that can either meet their ideal or at least come close to it. In order to determine the extent to which their ideal is not being met, one has to examine the situation in the Delta.

THE DELTA SITUATION

For purpose of precision, it might be best to define the area here discussed as the Mississippi Delta. It is the area that the following counties comprise: Bolivar, Coahoma, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Tunica and Washington. Seven other counties are partly Delta counties: Carrol, Holmes, Panola, Warren, Yalobusha, and Yazoo. The part-Delta counties will not be included in this study.

In 1960 the population of the Delta region was 368,739. Table I presents a county breakdown by race. Sixty-two per cent of the population was non-white. Nearly sixty per cent of the population in the Delta is classed as rural. Briefly now will be considered a few indices which gauge the types of lives many of the people in the Delta are leading.

Mortality rates

In 1961 the death rate for whites throughout the entire United States was 913 per 1 000 population. For nonwhites it was 916. In Mississippi the death rate for whites was 8.8 somewhat below the national average and Mississippi for nonwhites the rate was 11.0. In every county in the Delta except Quitman and Washington the death rate for whites was higher than the state average and for nonwhites, with the exception of Sunflower County, the death rate was higher in the Delta than it was for the rest of the state. (See Table II.) In 1961 nationally the infant mortality rate for white babies was 22.4 per 1 000 population for nonwhite babies 40.7. The respective figures for Mississippi were 23.0 and 50.0. In the Delta, the rate was lower for whites than the national average in only four counties. And in only three counties was the rate for nonwhites lower than the state average or the national average for nonwhites. For nonwhites the range among the counties was from 38.5 to 88.6. (See Table III.)

Housing

Some housing characteristics will be given for two Delta counties. In Bolivar County, in 1960, there were 15,508 housing units. Of these, 9,548 had no flush toilets, nor did the inhabitants have access to a flush toilet. Of these homes, 10,131 had no bathtub or shower. In 4,175 there was no piped water, and 6,300 were classified as either deteriorating or dilapidated. Of the 13,370 houses in Leflore County, 4,998 had no flush toilets, 6,218 had no bathtub or shower, 6,028 were classed as less than sound and 3,700 had no piped water. These counties are not the extreme cases; they were chosen because they are fairly typical examples of housing conditions in the Delta. In Table IV are the comparative figures on housing for the other nine counties in the Delta region. The general housing conditions--without even considering such matters as household appliances, type of fuel, rent expenditures, occupancy-per-room, etc.--can be described at best as unfortunate.

Education

In the Delta there are only fourteen schools accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. The fourteen high schools that are accredited are all white schools; there are no accredited Negro schools in the Delta. One of the counties has no high school for whites or Negroes and three counties have no high school for Negroes. In Tunica County, where there are five times as many Negro students as there are white, there is no Negro high school. In counties where there are no Negro high schools, Negroes undoubtedly attend high

schools in the nearest adjoining county; this however, increases the enrollment figure (as opposed to the census figure) of the county in which they do attend. In eight counties of the eleven having Negro high schools, the number of Negro students per high school, as shown by the census figure is disproportionately higher than the number of white students per high school. The Negro school census for one county, Bolivar is four times that of the white school census yet the expenditures for Negro instruction is only \$60,000 more than the expenditure for white instruction and there is one fewer Negro high school than there are white high schools. Mississippi as a state ranks lowest of the fifty states in estimated average annual teacher salaries. Within the state, the Delta region has annual average expenditures considerably lower than even the state average. (See Table V for statistics related to education.)

Economic considerations

The median income per person in the Delta for nonwhites is: in Bolivar \$430, Coahoma \$488, Humphreys \$408, Issaquena \$417, Leflore \$501, Quitman \$406, Sharkey \$437, Sunflower \$443, Tallahatchie \$451, Tunica \$406, and Washington \$584. It may seem incredible, but it's true. The median income per family can be seen in Table VI for both whites and nonwhites.

As the Delta is largely rural, it might be best to discuss its agricultural situation. The percentage of farmers who are tenants is presently the largest in the nation. (See Table VII.) The Delta as a rural area is an area of extreme poverty. It is without a doubt the most poverty-stricken area of comparable size in this country. However, this is not to say that the area has no wealth. In fact, the unfortunate part is that the great deal of wealth that exists in the Delta is in the hands of only a few.

Concentration of wealth

In Bolivar County, 5% of all the farms control more than 50% of all the farmland. In Coahoma, Humphreys, Leflore and Tunica 5% of all the farms control 66%, 50%, 55%, and 60% respectively of all the farmland. In Issaquena, 7% of all the farms control 75% of all the farmland. In Quitman, 2½% of all the farms control 25% of all the farmland. In Sharkey, 10% of all the farms control 66% of all the farmland. In Tallahatchie, less than 4% of all the farms control more than 40% of all the farmland. And in Washington County 9% of all the farms control 55% of all the farmland.

Wealth vs. Poverty

Hired workers, small farmers and tenants are the poor human elements in the Delta. Consider Quitman County. In Quitman County the average value of all products sold was \$7,199. The United States Department of Agriculture estimates sales of \$10,000 are needed to return a minimum farm income of \$2,500. In 1959 more than 70% of all farms in Quitman County had sales which were valued at less than \$5,000. At the other end, only 3% of all the farms had sales that totaled more than \$40,000

In Quitman County 4,077 hired workers were employed in 1959. These 4,077 hired farm workers received that year for wages \$1,744,810.

This was in a county whose total value of all agricultural products sold was \$15,088,805. The average annual income of the hired farm workers in Quitman County was approximately \$440. Table VIII gives figures on hired workers and wages they received.

THE PROBLEMATIC GAP

The problematic gap depends on the reader. You know how you feel things should be. You have been briefly given a glimpse of conditions in the Delta. The degree of seriousness depends on how far away "what is" is from what you feel should be. Regardless of what people in the particular think the ideal is, people in general will agree that the existing situation leaves much to be desired. And the crucial question becomes: What, if any, are the remedial alternatives for the Delta?

SOME REMEDIAL ALTERNATIVES

Individual effort

The people of the Delta themselves attempt to find relief from their plight by leaving the Delta. However, in most instances, this turns out to be no solution at all. The people who migrate usually go to large urban areas in the North or West. The emigrants from the Delta are largely unskilled and uneducated. The urban centers have no place for these people except the slum and the relief roll; this adds immensely to their problems, and provides no meaningful solution to the plight of the Delta migrant.

The role of the government

The federal government is acutely aware of the situation that besets the Delta region. It has initiated a number of programs and agencies to deal specifically with low-income rural areas. Four important ones are the Farmers' Home Administration, the Rural Areas Development Act, Area Redevelopment Administration, and the Manpower Retraining and Development Act. These programs could and should be able to do considerable good. However, they are not doing nearly as much as they could, and, more important, where they do lend some assistance, it is not given to the people who need it most.

Two factors are responsible for the lack of effectiveness of government programs:

1. The people who are in most need do not know about them, or if they do know about them, they do not know how to take advantage of them. A farmer whose income is below \$1,000 a year does not have time from a practical standpoint to be out organizing other poor farmers in order to improve their conditions of life. In many instances he would be fired from his job as an "agitator" or "trouble maker" if he tried.

2. The federal government's policy of local control allows local governments to thwart the intent of the federal program. As stated in a National Sharecroppers Fund newsletter: ". . . the policy of the federal government to have local control has created the problem. Applications for loans and other government aid are processed by appointe

committees of local farmers, who function without definite guidelines and with little federal supervision or administrative review. Negroes are almost never represented, and play no part in the decision-making of the committees, which are ostensibly intended to represent and safeguard the interests of the whole community. This is of course typical of the local power structure throughout the South, but its extension to the implementation of federal policy frustrates the intention of the Congress to aid the very people who are most disadvantaged." (1962)

A New Approach

Given the existing federal programs an enormous amount of assistance can be given the poor in poverty-stricken rural areas such as the Delta with only the presence in the area of an informed person who is interested in the welfare of the poor persons there and who also has a degree of organizational ability.

The following suggestion is proposed:

1. In each county in the Delta there should be a field worker. Rather than give one field worker the entire Delta, so that he spreads himself too thinly, it would be better to work on a county basis. It is possible that the financing of the field worker would be relatively inexpensive. There are scores of persons working for civil rights in the South and Mississippi who are doing it solely on a subsistence allowance. These persons in most instances have tremendous organizational ability and dedication. The job of such a field worker would include the following:

- a. establish contact with all the low-income farmers in the area.
- b. explain to them what the problems of their particular area are and what generates these problems.
- c. inform them of all the various federal programs for the rural poor.
- d. assist them by filling out applications and even taking the farmers to the local governmental agencies.
- e. organize local Rural Area Development committees.
- f. try to secure representation on the ASCS committees by informing the small farmers of the area that they can vote in the election of the ASCS and that the Secretary of Agriculture has said that he would declare void any election in which persons were refused their right to participate.
- g. secure from unemployed farmers and farm youth some participants for the Manpower Retraining Act and other such programs.

The job, as can be seen, is not a monumental one, but it does require an individual who has an enormous amount of energy to expend for little financial reward. Even if only a few of these jobs were accomplished it would reap many desirous benefits.

An Immediate Project

On Monday, October 29, 1963, it was announced that the federal government had approved twelve public works projects for the state of Mississippi. The projects include six hospital and six sewer projects.