

*The Community Economic Development Network of East Tennessee (CEDNET)*  
*East Tennessee*

**Mission:** “To serve as a network of organizations, based in low and moderate income communities, which supports the development of their internal capacity and effective strategies for addressing issues facing their communities. CEDnet promotes racial, economic, and social justice. It is based on the principle that diverse people and organizations from across the East Tennessee region can gain greater effectiveness by eliminating traditional barriers and by coordinating with and supporting one another.”

**Location and Population:** East Tennessee is made up of 35 counties in the heart of Southern Appalachia. Defined roughly by the Eastern time zone, this area is distinct in its geographic and cultural composition. The region is highly rural (42%) in comparison to the United States (20%). The rural quality of this particular region has contributed to the historic challenges and rewards of life in Appalachia. Vast expanses of rugged mountains and rolling hills span the area providing a variety of natural and cultural niches.

The broad spectrum of counties included in East Tennessee reach population levels as high as 382,032 in Knox County and as low as 4,945 in Pickett County according to the 2000 US Census. Similarly, racial distributions vary widely by county. Although Appalachia has historically been majority White (91% pre-1990), a rapid shift in population has occurred since 1990 due to an influx of People of Color. People of Color now make up 12% of the population, a large proportion of which are Latino.

**Resources and Challenges:** Due to the extensive nature of East Tennessee, the region includes a variety of natural and cultural resources. It is especially noted for its mountains, particularly the Great Smoky Mountains portion of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The biological diversity of the forests, caverns, rivers, and lakes in the area present an array of wildlife, birds, and wildflowers. The Tennessee River, which begins just East of Knoxville, and Cherokee National Forest provide additional outlets for outdoor appreciation and recreation. East Tennessee is also home to a variety of historic landmarks including numerous Civil War sites, the homes and grave of Andrew Johnson, and numerous sites on the Cherokee Trail of Tears. Such historical landmarks illustrate the rich cultural resources embedded in this area, including the contributions of historically oppressed populations such as African American, Latino, and Native American. Dynamic groups of people of Color have emerged to claim and publicize their contributions to the region’s history, culture, and current existence. Lastly, East Tennessee is considered the birthplace of country music and continues to harbor a variety of artistic and creative expressions.

Despite the aforementioned resources, East Tennessee is afflicted with high poverty levels concentrated in pockets where individuals have been isolated, voiceless, and powerless. Twenty-two of East Tennessee’s counties suffer from a poverty level above the 15% average of the State. Six counties have a poverty level at or above 21%. This crisis impacts those below the age of 18 in a profound way, with their rates of poverty reaching as high as 38% in Hancock County. Southern Appalachia experiences a considerable education deficit with a high school graduation rate of only 68%. The education deficit is only one contributing factor to a median household income that ranges as low as \$20,120 annually and averages 15% less than that of the State.

Poverty in East Tennessee, as well as the widening income gap between rural and metropolitan places, is due to a variety of factors including: a decline in real wages for counties that remain dominated by industry rather than technology; a decline in tobacco and regional farming which has eroded the economic base for small farmers; isolation and lack of recognition of communities of Color and their organizations; a general lack of financial resources for grassroots organizations; and a historic pattern of economic decision making that places power in the hands of a small number of outsiders that exploit the natural and human resources of the area.

**CEDNET and Its Participants:** CEDNET began in 1997 as an informal meeting between five organizations who hoped to amplify their voice for change in East Tennessee. The participants discussed common goals and methods of mutual support. CEDNET functioned as an informal peer organization until 2004 at which point it became incorporated with a formal Board of Directors and three task forces. The organizational structure of CEDNET has consistently been streamlined, with a contractual relationship between the Board of Directors and various individuals or organizations that provide services for the organization.

A task force structure organically emerged out of CEDNET's quarterly regional meetings, beginning with the Latino Task Force in 2001. The African American Task Force formed in 2003 followed by the Rural Task Force, renamed the Sustainable & Equitable Agriculture Development (SEAD) Task Force, in 2004. Each task force meets separately to identify issues and concerns, they then organize across County lines to address such issues and challenge the historic lack of power for rural Appalachians and people of Color. CEDNET contracts with individuals who serve as coordinators for each task force, as well as a part-time program coordinator. Together these coordinators are responsible for serving as a link to resources and providing technical or capacity support. CEDNET hopes to increase its internal capacity by developing a staff position within three to five years.

In 2005 a Dismantling Racism Committee was born out of the diversity within CEDNET. This diversity had naturally fostered bridge building through friendship, education, and mutual support of individuals from very diverse backgrounds. While each task force addresses distinct and separate issues, the broader CEDNET network acts as a fertile laboratory for dismantling racism and anti-racist work. Dismantling racism mini-sessions and day long workshops continue to be hosted by the Committee and attended by CEDNET participants.

The Board of Directors is composed of five individuals, one from each of the task forces and two additional CEDNET members. Currently the Board includes two African Americans, two White/Anglos, and one Latina. Two of the members are male, three are female, and they are from both rural and urban areas of East Tennessee. All of the Board members are connected to communities and/or organizations associated with CEDNET, and are composed of, or work with, low-income individuals and communities.

Although CEDNET has no official membership structure, it currently garners active participation from over 130 representatives of 30 organizations in 13 counties. Participants attend quarterly meetings, an annual conference, as well as task force meetings if they so choose. Such networking allows for the movement of resources and support between different grassroots

leaders and organizations. Participant organizations vary widely in their size, scope, and field of interest but they maintain a vibrant connection due to shared values, commitment to racial, social, and economic justice, as well as a shared sense of place. Grassroots organizations from low-wealth rural and urban communities in East Tennessee use CEDNET as a means to increase their individual power through collective dialogue, planning, and action.

**Results of CEDNET's Work:** For the past ten years CEDNET has worked, both formally and informally, to address the needs of a broad continuum of East Tennessee residents. CEDNET and its' Task Forces have had the following successes...

*Latino Task Force =*

- Spearheaded the research and design of the “five point program” model for banks to address the challenge of undocumented workers’ lack of access to bank accounts. SunTrust Bank initiated the program in East Tennessee and has since adopted it nationally.
- Developed a directory of small Latino-owned local businesses.
- Created the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of East Tennessee in 2005.
- Currently developing a Centro Hispano as a central location for the Latino population.
- Currently developing a manual of legal rights and resources for the Latino immigrant population.

*African American Task Force Coalition of East Tennessee=*

- Identification of over 40 communities across the Southeast that have celebrated the 8<sup>th</sup> of August as Emancipation Day.
- 8<sup>th</sup> of August Conference in 2005: a two-day event with 130 people.
- East Tennessee Historical Society award in 2006.
- Continual expansion efforts for regional and national recognition of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August.
- Tennessee Proclamation establishing the 8<sup>th</sup> of August as Emancipation Day in 2007.
- Annual listing in the Black Pages.
- Two Rosenwald Schools in East Tennessee listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

*Sustainable and Equitable Agriculture Development Task Force =*

- “Farm-to-School” Project: Link local growers with local institutions to increase use of local food products. 14 farmers, 3 county school systems, and 3 restaurants are interested in participating in the project.
- Completed community food assessments of three counties in East Tennessee.
- Grant writing collaboration.
- Development of a shared use kitchen, farmer cooperative, and Community Food Project.

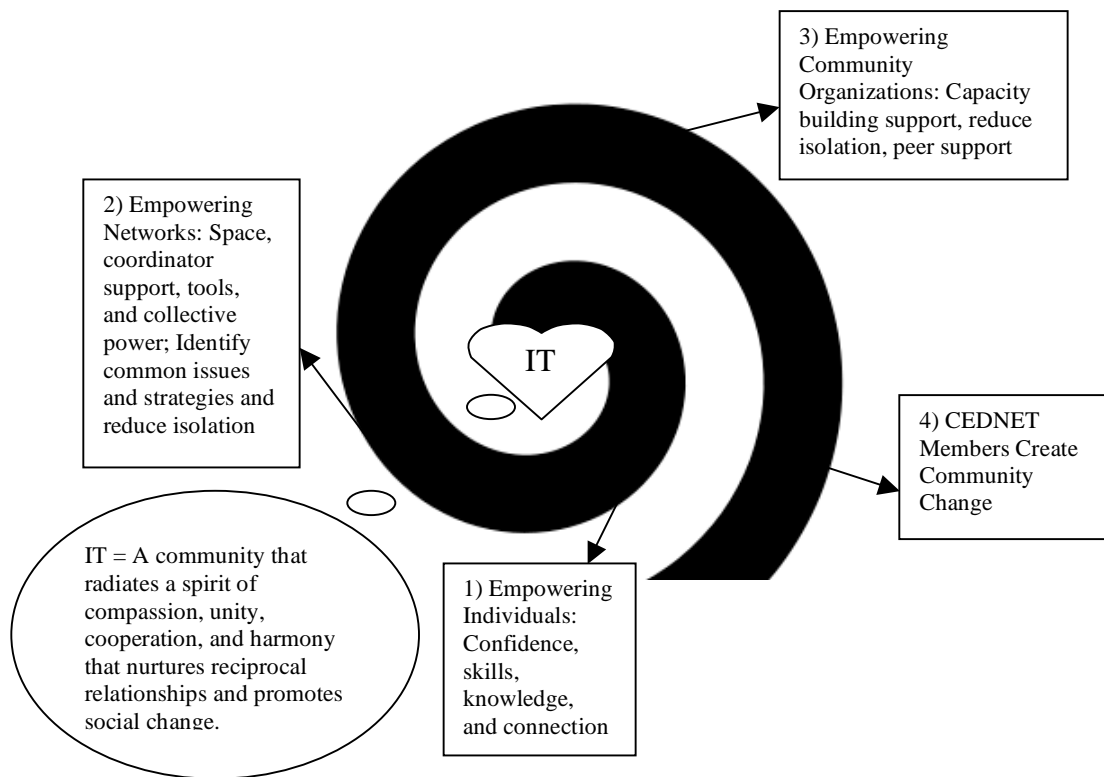
*Dismantling Racism Committee =*

- Created a safe space that allows for difficult conversation between diverse populations and people.
- Host of Southern Poverty Law Center’s combating racism training at CEDNET annual conference.
- CEDNET members’ anti-racist response to various local occurrences.
- Dismantling Racism Workshop: 24 individuals from 10 CEDNET member organizations attended a day-long workshop conducted by Virginia Organizing Project.

*Broader CEDNET Network =*

- Information Sharing System: Allows for communication between member organizations and participants with a shared commitment to social, economic, environmental, and racial justice.
- Created strong relationships within a peer support system among grassroots leaders and organizations in East Tennessee.

## Community Economic Development Network of East Tennessee (CEDNET): Model of Change



For More Information Please Contact CEDNET at:

[www.cednet.us](http://www.cednet.us)

502 South Gay St. Knoxville TN 37902

(865)637-0484