

***McIntosh Sustainable Environment and Economic Development, Inc. (SEED)***  
***McIntosh County, Georgia***

**Mission:** “McIntosh SEED is a grassroots, community-based organization working in McIntosh County, Georgia. Our work is guided by the social, economic, environmental, and cultural interests of the community. We work to provide quality education, better housing and recreational facilities, business opportunities, and environmental protection and restoration. We are committed to creating and sustaining a healthy and diverse community through community development, community organizing, advocacy, and direct service”.

**Location and Population:** McIntosh County is located on the coast of Georgia, approximately 50 miles south of Savannah. It is a rural community that is rich in diverse ecological treasures. Edged by the ocean and crosscut by several tributaries and streams, McIntosh County has historically been the home of a vibrant shrimping and coastal community. Darien, its County seat, is the second oldest planned city in Georgia.

The 2006 US Census estimates the population of McIntosh County at 11,248 individuals. The County has historically been diverse although a population shift occurred after 1865 when Blacks outnumbered Whites four to one. Today the population is 64% White, 34% Black, 1% Latino, and <1% Asian and American Native. Currently, the Latino community is growing.

**Resources and Challenges:** McIntosh County is endowed with a variety of natural and cultural resources. The aforementioned shrimping industry once played an important role as a local employer. In addition, vast quantities of land throughout the County are incredible assets for local farmers and the community. The Altamaha River provides access to cypress swamps and tidal marshes that are home to a variety of birds and sea creatures. Harris Neck, a 3,000 acre region 20 miles north of Darien, is a breathtaking wilderness area that holds a rich history of African American experience since the late 1700s. Sapelo Island, a pristine barrier island, is deeply connected to Gullah/Geechee heritage and culture. Stories and songs passed down from the original village in Sierra Leone where the regions’ African ancestors were taken continue to be shared today. Ethnic foods such as heirloom sweet potatoes, fresh okra, and sweet corn prepared in unique and traditional ways are a delicious cultural resource as well.

Amidst these resources, however, McIntosh County suffers from a poverty rate that is among the highest of Georgia’s 159 counties. The 2004 US Census claims that 17.5% of the population lives below the poverty line, as compared to 13.7% for the State of Georgia. The majority of residents are low-income with a median household income of \$31,000 annually. With a 12% high school drop-out rate, only 71% of residents have a high school diploma and only 11% have a bachelor’s degree. Unemployment and underemployment plague many families, resulting in nearly 29% of residents below the age of 18 living in poverty.

Poverty in the County is a result of many factors including historical inequities within the political and social system that have kept power in the hands of an elite few and created a tremendous lack of opportunity for others. Lack of access to resources such as home and business loans has restricted the development of assets among low-wealth individuals. The decline of the shrimping/fishing industry, the rise of a service-based economy characterized by

dead-end, low-paying jobs, and the location of manufacturing and industry, in Savannah and Brunswick, leave few opportunities for a living wage within the County. These patterns have resulted in an exodus of many seeking an opportunity for a better life. Lastly, access to adequate education in the County is limited and operates on a two-tiered structure. This structure provides resources and support to middle- and upper-class households while low-wealth students who struggle often leave the system without the fundamentals of a basic education. The resulting low skill and education levels increase unemployment and underemployment and add to the sense of hopelessness and apathy among many people.

**SEED and Its Members:** In 1997 a group of approximately 150 concerned citizens gathered at the Elm Grove Community Church to discuss long-standing poverty, oppressive social and political dynamics, and the decline of the shrimping industry. The meeting was an unprecedented gathering of Blacks and Whites in the 250-year history of McIntosh County. Residents shared common concerns regarding education, jobs, housing, the environment, and the County's traditional power structure. SEED emerged from this original meeting, an organization committed to addressing the root causes of poverty in the County that were understood as a result of 250 years of inequity. Ten years later, SEED continues to operate on the values established at this first community gathering. Decision making starts at the community level with a reliance on principles of inclusion and equality. The organization strives to work across the artificially constructed lines of race and class, continually supporting empowerment and confidence building among oppressed populations.

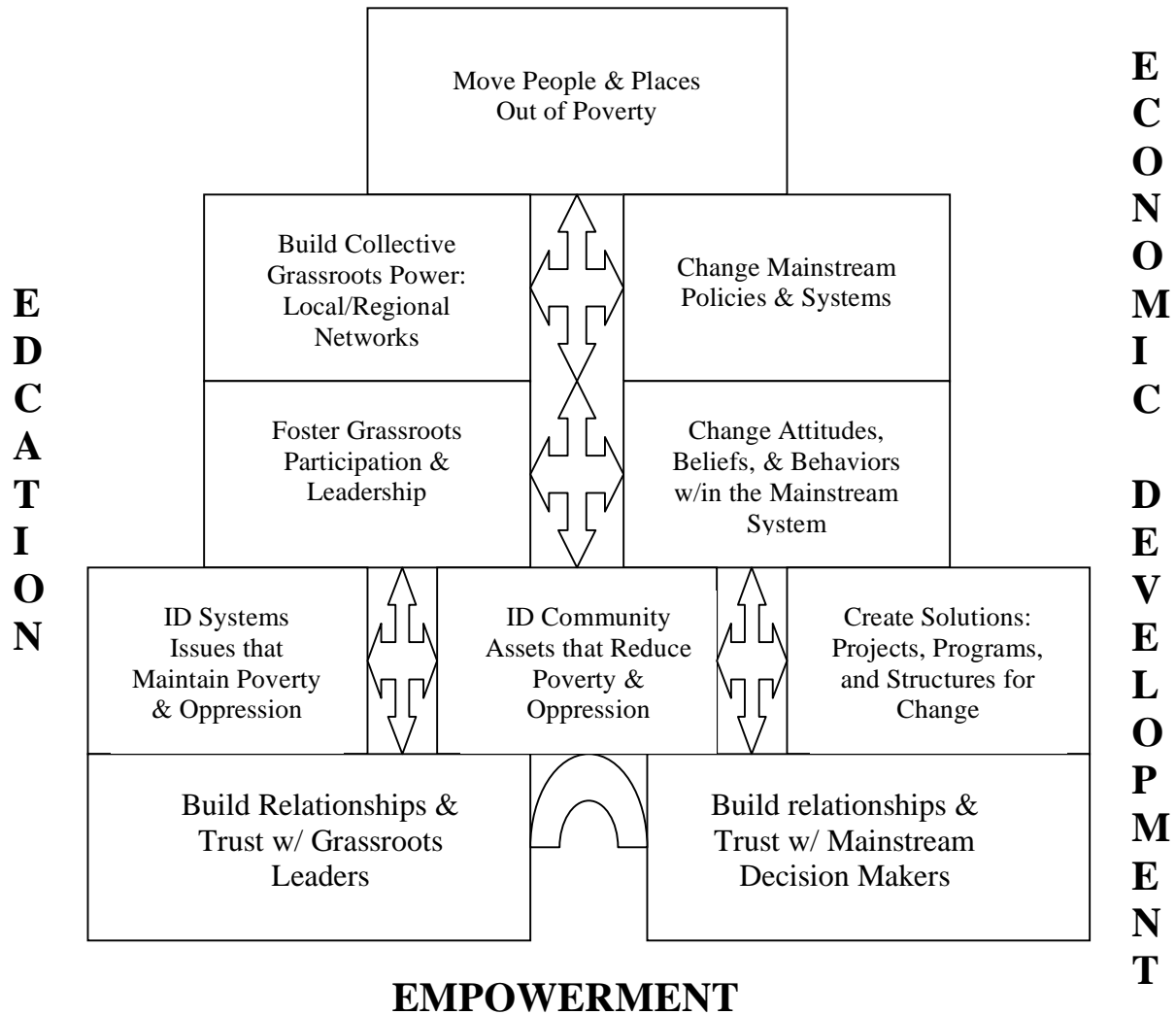
Today SEED consists of a Board of Directors, an Executive Director, a Program Director, and a myriad of community members. The Board is composed of nine members, all of whom live and/or work in the County and represent the interests of low-wealth community members. There are over 300 McIntosh County community members and 200 statewide members, representing a mixture of individuals, groups, and institutions. Membership dues are based on financial ability. Originally a task force structure was used to identify issues to be addressed and to implement programs needed by the community. The task force structure no longer exists, but members continue to work alongside staff as volunteers to plan and implement programs. Annual community meetings are used to incite participation and excitement surrounding specific needs and opportunities. The values set forth in SEED's mission statement create a network of individuals and organizations committed to improving McIntosh County.

**Results of SEED's Work:** For the past ten years SEED has worked to address the needs of the McIntosh County community and has had the following successes...

- Development of Harris Neck Heritage/Cultural Tour: Conducted by former Harris Neck residents and their descendents this tour provides accurate information regarding the African American history of the region. The tour has financially benefited several low-wealth residents associated with tour provision or associated businesses. Tour evaluation forms have clearly illustrated a positive influence on racial attitudes in the County.
- African American Heritage/Cultural Tour Network...forthcoming.
- Defeat of Water Rate Increase 2006: SEED responded to an increase in the cost of water for those without private wells that would have inordinately affected low-wealth individuals and families. Grassroots collaboration quickly defeated this inequitable bill. This event empowered many community members who had previously not been heard.

- Organic Food Project: The County Commission has decided to support SEED's organic food sovereignty project by clearing the necessary land for an organic plot. This plot will be tended by the high school's agriculture class and will provide healthier produce to residents.
- Local Farmer's Market: Forthcoming...
- Shrimper's Co-op: Developed in partnership with the University of GA Marine Extension Services and GA Shrimper's Association.
- First Computer Technology Lab in McIntosh County: With 66% of McIntosh County residents without access to a computer, this program helped to bridge the "digital divide".
- Micro-Enterprise Program: Series of workshops and seminars to support low-wealth community members start and grow their small businesses.
- Annual College and Career Fair AND Post-secondary Scholarship Program: Developed and implemented to increase post-secondary enrollment. It has risen 15% in five years.
- Tutorial Programs: Initially held in several churches in low-wealth communities this program was overwhelmingly accepted by parents, teachers, and other community members. It was brought into the school system and had increased student performance in the elementary school from below standard to the 2005 Governor's Gold Award.
- Race, Class, and Structure Workshop: First of its kind for social, political, and economic leaders in the County. Hosted an honest discussion of race and class, and exposed the need for changed thought processes and shared understanding.
- Certified Housing Counselors: Sponsored two community members for certification.
- Environmentally Compatible Economic Development Criteria: Developed as a guide for the County's growth.
- Leadership Development: Individuals associated with SEED have garnered seats on the Board of Education, Darien City Council, County Commission, etc. Such a presence in a position of influence is a useful tool of civic engagement and policy impact for low-wealth communities.
- Civic Participation: SEED continues to break through the apathy and hopelessness clinging to low-wealth communities. Avenues for participation and tangible success that breaks down long-standing barriers to true integration, increases the self-esteem and leadership capacity of McIntosh County residents.

### McIntosh SEED The Building Blocks of Change



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