



LOCAL FOODS, LOCAL PLACES

Technical Assistance Program



An Action Plan for
Strengthening Tracy City
and Grundy County
through Local Foods and
Local Places

Tracy City, TN

October 5, 2015



Community Story

Tracy City, Tennessee is a small town with a rich history, sitting atop Tennessee’s Cumberland Plateau in rural Grundy County. The town of about 1,500 people can trace its history back to the discovery of coal in 1840. Investors built the Mountain Goat Railroad in 1852 to transport the coal and towns sprung up to provide services for the workers and their employers. Tracy City’s namesake, Samuel Franklin Tracy, started the Sewanee Mining Company, which shipped the first load of coal from the town in 1858.¹ Following the Civil War, the region’s access to coal as an economic driver played an important role in transforming the South’s economy from an agrarian focus to manufacturing.

The coal industry and the wealth it brought also helped make Tracy City and the surrounding communities a hotbed of education and culture in the Appalachian region. The Sewanee Mining Company donated 10,000 acres for Sewanee University, which today is a thriving liberal arts college 12 miles west of Tracy City.² Grundy County was also home to the Highlander Folk School, which was known for its promotion of Civil Rights in the 1950s, and the Monteagle Sunday School Assembly, which has operated since 1882 promoting cultural arts through its summer programs.³

Like much of Appalachia, the economic landscape changed in the 20th century and the town and county went through a long period of economic contraction. Public health and economic fortunes steeply declined. According to the Robert Wood Johnson’s County Health Rankings, Grundy County in 2015 ranks last of 95 counties in Tennessee for overall health outcomes and quality of life.⁴ The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) considers Grundy County “distressed,” which means its economic performance is among the bottom 10 percent of all counties in the United States.⁵

There are reasons for optimism though. Grundy County is tackling its health challenges head on through new programs aimed at increasing access to healthy local foods. For example, the Grundy County Health Council and Diabetes Coalition is working



The Fiery Gizzard Trail is one of many popular outdoor destinations that attract people to the area (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

¹ The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture. Grundy County.

<https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=576>. Accessed August 25, 2015.

² Sewanee. About Sewanee. <http://www.sewanee.edu/about/university-history/>. Accessed August 25, 2015.

³ Monteagle Sunday School Assembly. About Us. <http://mssa1882.net/about.html>. Accessed August 25, 2015.

⁴ County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. Tennessee.

<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2015/rankings/outcomes/overall>. Access August 25, 2015.

⁵ Appalachian Regional Commission. County Economic Status in Appalachia, FY 2016.

http://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=105. Access August 26, 2015.

through a four-year grant from the ARC, Marshall University, and the Bristol Myers Squibb Foundation for programs to prevent and control diabetes through healthier diets. The area has several farmers markets and a local food hub – Rooted Here – that sells local produce to Sewanee. Meanwhile, the town’s elementary school, local food bank, and a church have started community gardens as training tools and to provide fresh healthy produce for their patrons.

Tracy City is also working to improve health and economic opportunity by making the community more walkable, promoting tourism, and targeting resources towards its historic downtown. Perhaps the most notable strategy is the town’s project to build a three mile trail connecting its elementary school on the west side to downtown. This segment will eventually be part of a 35-mile rail trail following the right of way of the former Mountain Goat Railroad. The Tennessee Department of Transportation in 2014



The community is planning to transform its old high school into a Learning and Development Center (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

awarded Tracy City a \$603,000 grant for its section of the trail. The project includes funds for trailhead parking and sidewalk improvements in the downtown area. Tracy City is also participating in Tennessee’s Main Street program. Through the program, Tracy City completed a downtown revitalization plan that aims to re-establish the town as a main attraction in the South Cumberland Plateau region.

But the linchpin of Tracy City’s efforts to improve health and economic outcomes is a proposal to restore the town’s vacant high school into the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center. The Center will be a community centerpiece, housing programs focused on health, wellness, education, and workforce development. The project has received

support from the ARC and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) through technical assistance and grants.

Tracy City applied for technical assistance through the Local Foods, Local Places program in 2014 to inject new energy into the Learning and Development Center project and make connections to other efforts, such as the Mountain Goat Trail, that are underway in the region. The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the ARC, EPA, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). The Learning and Development Center’s mission aligns well with the desired outcomes of the Local Foods, Local Places program, which include:

- More economic opportunities for local farmers and business.
- Better access to healthy local food, especially among disadvantaged groups.
- A revitalized downtown that is the economic anchor of the community.

This action plan is a key outcome of the Local Foods, Local Places project in Tracy City. It captures the highlights of a two-day workshop and includes a targeted set of goals and actions for moving forward.

Engagement

The main event of the Local Foods, Local Places program in Tracy City was a workshop on July 20 and 21, 2015. The workshop brought local residents together with local, state, and federal agency representatives to identify next steps for building a healthier community and stronger economy, with an emphasis on strategies that incorporate local foods and placemaking. This action plan, which lays out several critical next steps, is the primary outcome of the workshop.

The workshop attracted a wide array of local and regional stakeholders, including officials of the Tracy City and Grundy County local governments, Southeast Tennessee Development District, South Cumberland Farmers Market, Sewanee - The University of the South, Middle Tennessee State University, the South Cumberland Plateau Health Network, Tennessee General Assembly, Grundy County Health Coalition, Dutch Maid restaurant, Rooted Here, Grundy County Schools, University of Tennessee Extension, Mountain T.O.P. outreach ministries, Chattanooga Area Food Bank, Mountain Goat Trail Alliance, and a local farm and church.

Several state and federal officials also participated including representatives from the Tennessee Department of Transportation, USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Food and Nutrition Service, USDA Rural Development, ARC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, EPA's Office of Environmental Justice, EPA Headquarters, and EPA Regional 4 (Atlanta).

The workshop featured three sessions. The first session included presentations on the economic, health, social, and placemaking benefits of local foods, while also encouraging discussion about local challenges and opportunities. The second and third sessions further explored opportunities for improving health and revitalizing the community. The information gleaned through exercises and discussions influenced the community goals described below and a set of actions for achieving them.

1. Define programs for the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center.
2. Establish new partnerships to advance community health, wellness, workforce development, and economic development goals.
3. Strengthen physical connections within Tracy City and to nearby destinations to support health and wellness, local tourism, and economic development.
4. Strengthen the existing farmers market and South Cumberland Food Hub (a.k.a. Rooted Here).

Figure 1 is a summary of the workshop process.



The workshop attracted a large and diverse crowd of local, regional, state, and federal representatives (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

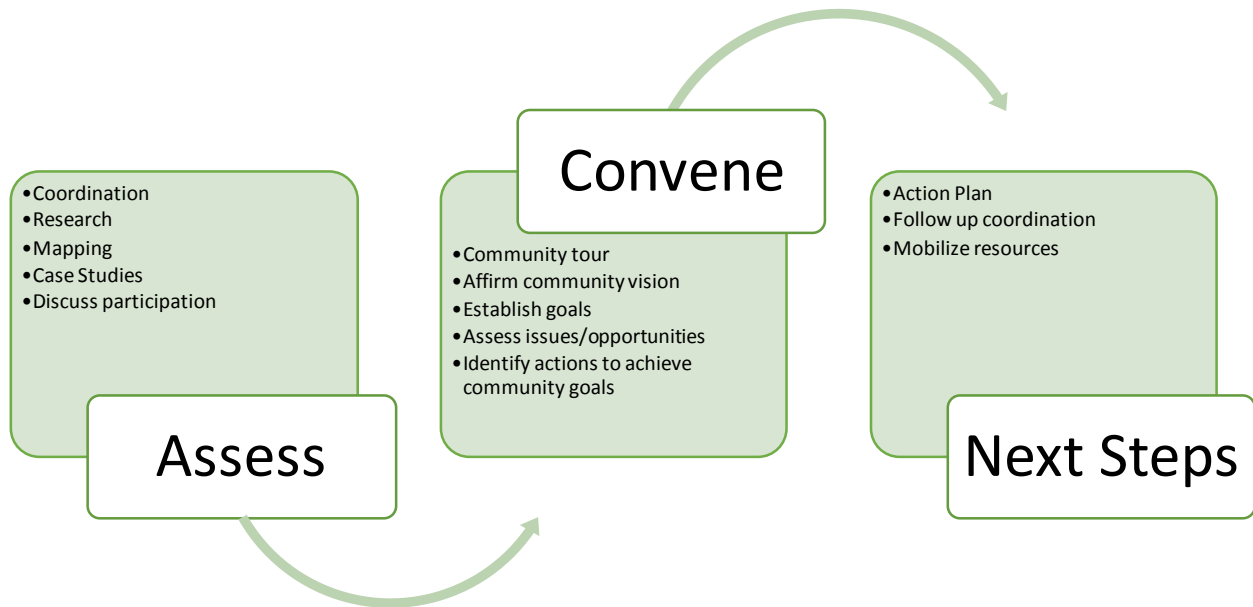


Figure 1 - Technical Assistance Process Diagram

Vision

The vision for Tracy City’s future, as expressed by local stakeholders during the workshop, is simple. Tracy City wants healthy adults raising healthy kids. The depth of the challenges facing Tracy City mean that achieving the vision is not as simple. The boldest strategy is the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center. The community envisions the Center as a safe place where people can grow and learn together and obtain skills that will enable people to stay on the South Cumberland Plateau and earn a living. Tracy City also sees building the Mountain Goat Trail, expanding access to healthy local foods, and revitalizing downtown as key strategies in support of this vision.

Strengths, Challenges, and Opportunities

In order to achieve its vision, the town and its partners are planning to take action to address obstacles and capitalize on strength and opportunities. This section summarizes workshop discussions that revealed the most pressing challenges and promising opportunities for moving forward. Perhaps the most important takeaway from these discussions is that while Tracy City is faced with serious challenges related to health and economic opportunity, it is also a region full of potential, much of which comes from its beautiful natural setting and its proximity to the growing regions of Nashville and Chattanooga.

The community’s people are also a critical asset. Tracy City’s leaders have planted several seeds of change that are beginning to make a positive difference. These seeds include programs such as the Grundy County Health Council and Diabetes Coalition and assets such as the Mountain Goat Trail, farmers market and local food hub, community gardens, the famous Dutch Maid Bakery, and the future

Learning and Development Center. The Local Foods, Local Places workshop highlighted these and many other emerging assets and programs upon which the action plan builds.

Strengths

Tracy City draws strength from its people, natural assets, and location. These inherent qualities are reason for optimism that the community can improve public health and its economic condition.

- **Dedicated and Energized People** – Tracy City and Grundy County are fortunate to have many people that are dedicated to the community and willing to volunteer their time. Their efforts have created several new programs and attracted financial support from state and federal agencies. The key to maximizing the potential of this asset is better coordination, which is an emphasis of this action plan.
- **Natural Assets** – The South Cumberland Plateau has a lot to offer for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. The 13-mile Fiery Gizzard Trail is popular with hikers from across the state and was named by Backpacker Magazine as one of the best 25 hiking trails in the United States.⁶ The northern trail head is in Tracy City. The trail is part of the South Cumberland State Recreation Area, which includes several sites in and around Tracy City, including the Fiery Gizzard Trail and Grundy Lakes. The Mountain Goat Trail, when complete, will add a 35-mile rail trail to the mix.
- **Proximity to Major Metropolitan Centers** – Tracy City is located in between two growing metropolitan areas – Nashville and Chattanooga. People living in these areas can easily visit the South Cumberland Plateau and take advantage of its aforementioned outdoor recreational opportunities. The action plan calls for tapping into this strength through enhanced marketing.

Challenges

The challenges listed below are obstacles to achieving the community's vision. While they do not encompass every challenge, these ones were most discussed during the workshop.

- **Limited Population** – Tracy City is too small to support a wide array of restaurants, hotels, and shops. People visiting the region will find more options in nearby Monteagle and Sewanee. The small population also means that there are few people to enlist as volunteers. This is a problem because the programs already underway and envisioned in the Learning and Development Center will likely require volunteer support. The highly dedicated and energized people running these programs need more people power.
- **Drug Abuse and Poor Health** – Like most of Appalachia, Grundy County is suffering from an epidemic of drug abuse. Drugs contribute to already poor health conditions while also making it difficult for people addicted to drugs to obtain jobs. Grundy County is also last among Tennessee's 95 counties for health outcomes. The Learning and Development Center is a key strategy for attacking this challenge.
- **Access to Resources** – Nine counties in Tennessee have had a poverty rate of more than 20 percent for the last 30 years. These counties are considered to have persistent poverty. Grundy

⁶ Benton, Ben. "Fiery Gizzard Trail to close at Raven Point in December." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. August 24, 2015. <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/local/story/2015/aug/24/fiery-gizzard-trail-close-raven-point-decemb/321347/>.

County is the only one of these nine counties not covered by a regional philanthropic foundation, which makes it difficult for Grundy County to attract local support. One of the community's top priorities is to be included in a regional foundation's geographic territory. Such a designation would help Tracy City obtain more local funding commitments for the Learning and Development Center.

- **Coordination** – Related to challenge of limited population is coordination. With limited people-power, it can be difficult for people working on the various initiatives to find time to sit down and coordinate their efforts. Yet this is very important. It prevents duplication of effort and helps the region deploy its limited resources efficiently.
- **Diet** – The prevailing diet in the region is a major challenge to better health. Foods and drinks high in sugar are popular and are often more affordable than healthier options on a per calorie basis. While the farmers market accepts SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps), workshop attendees said that most people are unaware of the program. This action plan aims to improve awareness.
- **Growing Local Farmers** – The demand for local foods is relatively low in the South Cumberland Plateau region. Aside from Sewanee University, there are no institutional buyers for the region's local food hub. As a result, Rooted Here decided in 2015 to merge with the food hub serving Chattanooga. And while there is a desire to provide greater access to healthy local foods for lower income people and families, there is also a need for farmers to make a sufficient income. This will require greater demand and more customers.
- **Walkability** – The Mountain Goat Trail will be a tremendous asset for Tracy City that promises to improve walkability. In order to maximize the trail's potential, the town many need to make other walkability improvements so that people can access the trail from their homes on bike or foot. Many streets in town lack sidewalks and the fast highways bisecting the town are difficult to cross. The action plan provides some simple steps the town can take to improve walking conditions to and from the trail so that it can maximize its potential.
- **Renovating the Old High School** – There are several challenges that stand in the way of renovating the old high school. The building lacks sufficient water pressure for a sprinkler system. Portions of the high school property are a brownfield that may require expensive clean up. Mold has infiltrated many parts of the building after nearly two decades of neglect. Portions of the roof need to be replaced and some classrooms contain asbestos. None of these challenges are insurmountable, but they all require financial resources to address. Fortunately,



The Mountain Goat Trail will cross a busy U.S. highway near the famous Dutch Maid Bakery. Ensuring safe walking conditions on local streets and highways is important to the trail's success. (Credit: Renaissance Planning)

EPA is providing technical and financial support to address the brownfield obstacle and ARC has also pledged about \$500,000 to support the renovation.

Opportunities

- **Health Clinic or Primary Care Provider** – Grundy County is underserved by medical providers. A primary care provider would have no shortage of patients in Tracy City and the surrounding region. Diabetes is prevalent in the area, so a clinic following the PPOD model (Pharmacy, Podiatry, Optometry, and Dentistry) is an opportunity for improving health outcomes.
- **Cross-Promotion** – The assets and programs already existing in the area can support each other through cross-promotion. As an example, the state park can promote downtown Tracy City to people that come to the region to hike the Fiery Gizzard Trail. Regarding local foods, the food bank can promote the farmers market and let people know that it accepts SNAP EBT cards. Everyone can benefit from greater cross-promotion.
- **Sewanee** – The University is a critical resource for Tracy City and the entire South Cumberland Plateau. It attracts scholars and students that are interested in finding solutions to the health challenges facing Tracy City and the region. Sewanee is already a proactive partner in addressing these challenges. They support the VISTA volunteers that are working to improve public health and are a major purchaser of local foods. They have a natural interest in seeing the region thrive and reach its full potential. There are likely more opportunities to enlist their support.
- **High Speed Internet** – Tracy City has especially fast internet speeds for a rural community. Small companies or self-employed people looking for an affordable place to live with easy access to outdoor amenities could find that Tracy City is an attractive place to live and conduct business. It also presents an opportunity for existing businesses to grow.
- **Collaboration with Chattanooga Region** – Chattanooga is less than an hour to the east. The growing region has substantial demand for locally-grown produce and products. Farmers and businesses in Tracy City and the South Cumberland Plateau can tap into this demand and earn income that benefits the region. Enterprises that are struggling to stay afloat in Grundy County, such as the local food hub, may find new life and sources of revenue by working more closely with similar organizations in the Chattanooga region.

Action Plan

This section introduces the four major goals that emerged through the workshop. The goals address several of the obstacles and capitalize on the opportunities describe in the previous section. Each goal is supported by specific actions, which are steps Tracy City can take in the near term to move towards its vision of healthy adults raising healthy kids. The goals and action items are presented in Appendix A in their complete form, which includes a time frame, lead role, supporting cast, cost, funding sources, and near-term steps.

Goal 1 – Define programs for the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center. The Learning and Development Center is the linchpin of local efforts to improve health and quality of life. Yet the program for the Center needs refinement. People have different ideas of what it could be and the types of programs it could house. Before moving forward with renovating the old high school for

the Learning and Development Center, it is important that community leaders have a clear vision and plan. The actions described below are critical next steps for articulating that vision and plan.

- **Action 1.1** – Reconvene the Steering Committee that is planning the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center project and meet on a regular schedule.
- **Action 1.2** – Establish a management structure for the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center.
- **Action 1.3** – Identify an anchor tenant that is willing to support the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center by leasing space in it.
- **Action 1.4** – Stabilize the former high school to prevent further deterioration.
- **Action 1.5** – Develop a strategic plan and business plan for the development of the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center that includes critical information about the management structure, business plan, programming, and economic feasibility.

Goal 2 – Establish new partnerships to advance community health, wellness, workforce development, and economic development goals.

Tracy City is a town of 1,500 people in a rural region. The programs and initiatives already underway in the region are impressive given the shortage of human resources. Coordination among the local leaders and the existing programs will help them use resources efficiently and gain additional outside support.

- **Action 2.1** – Identify non-government funding sources and partnerships.
- **Action 2.2** – Identify potential new local, regional, and state government resources that can support the Learning and Development Center.
- **Action 2.3** – Seek support from the University of the South and local faith-based organizations to support programming and provide mentoring services at the Learning and Development Center.
- **Action 2.4** – Strengthen Grundy County’s relationship with the Southeast Tennessee Tourism Association (SETTA).
- **Action 2.5** – Improve coordination among existing councils and groups that represent other efforts in the region (such as the Mountain Goat Trail) and the Steering Committee for the Learning and Development Center.

Goal 3 – Strengthen physical connections within Tracy City and to nearby destinations to support health & wellness, local tourism, and economic development.

Connections between Tracy City and nearby communities and natural assets will support economic development and health. Once the Mountain Goat Trail is built, people will be able to walk or ride their bikes nearly 20 miles east or west from the town. They will also be able to use the trail to get to popular attractions, such as the Fiery Gizzard Trail. In order to maximize the benefits of this investment, it is important for the town to make it safe and convenient for people to access the trail. This means building visible crosswalks, possibly creating new sidewalk connections between neighborhoods and the trail, and providing signage, lighting, and parking.

- **Action 3.1** – Design the Mountain Goat Trail three-mile segment between Monteagle and Tracy City and identify a source for construction funding.

- **Action 3.2** – Identify priority sidewalk, crosswalk, signage, and streetscape improvements for downtown Tracy City that will help people access the Mountain Goat Trail and safely cross Main Street.
- **Action 3.3** – Install public art along the Mountain Goat Trail, using a different theme for each town (potentially a railroad theme for Tracy City).
- **Action 3.4** – Build a trailhead parking area in downtown Tracy City with tourist information, space for a seasonal bike rental business, and wayfinding signage to attractions, historic sites, trails, and parks.
- **Action 3.5** – Promote the Mountain Goat Trail and Tracy City at the region’s State Parks and through publications in Nashville and Chattanooga.

Goal 4 – Strengthen the existing farmers market and South Cumberland Food Hub (a.k.a. Rooted Here).

Tracy City already has a farmers market and a local food hub. These are key tools for getting more local, fresh, and healthy foods to people in the community. But these programs have been struggling to find customers and provide a sufficient income stream for farmers. The actions below are important steps for shoring up these key programs.

- **Action 4.1** – Explore partnering or merging with a food hub serving the larger Southeast Tennessee region, such as Harvest Here, which is based in Chattanooga.
- **Action 4.2** – Launch a co-promotion program between the farmers market and health-oriented partners to offer services such as health screenings and cooking demonstrations at the farmers market.
- **Action 4.3** – Open the South Cumberland Food Hub in August 2015.
- **Action 4.4** – Develop a long-term plan for how the South Cumberland Food Hub can serve the University of the South.
- **Action 4.5** – Implement a Double Bucks Program for all area farmers markets.

Implementation

Local officials and workshop participants started to prioritize the actions described in the previous section soon after the Local Foods, Local Places workshop. The community reached a consensus that rehabilitating the old high school is its top priority. Tracy City is seeking grants through several programs to cover the rehabilitation costs. Another top priority is providing working capital for Tracy City to operate the South Cumberland Learning and Development Center during its first year. Having a financial buffer to cover operational costs, such as utilities and basic maintenance, while the Center fills with tenants is a key to its financial sustainability.

As a community in the Appalachian Regional Commission’s territory, Tracy City is eligible for \$20,000 to support implementation of this plan. The community agreed to use the implementation funding to support rehabilitation of the old high school and to provide a working capital buffer.

Livability Principles Advanced by the Action Plan

The Local Foods, Local Places program is supported by the federal Partnership for Sustainable Communities. The Partnership includes EPA, DOT, and HUD. These agencies have been working since

2009 to incorporate livability considerations into their policies and funding programs. This section describes how Tracy City’s Action Plan supports each of the livability principles.

Provide more Transportation Choices

Tracy City sees the Mountain Goat Trail as an anchor of its future economy. The trail will provide more transportation choices for people living in Tracy City and the South Cumberland Plateau. But it will also bring new tourist spending into the community and connect downtown Tracy City with some of the popular surrounding assets, like the Fiery Gizzard Trail, Sewanee, and Monteagle. People living in Tracy City will be able to visit these places simply by walking and biking.

Promote Equitable, Affordable Housing

The workshop did not focus explicitly on housing. However, it is an important issue in Tracy City. The town has many properties that are in disrepair. This action plan focused on providing more transportation choices, making healthy food more widely available and affordable, and improving access to healthcare. To the extent that those actions will lower a household’s cost for transportation, food, and healthcare, they could make better quality housing more attainable.

Enhance Economic Competitiveness

Tracy City and Grundy County have not economically recovered from the loss of jobs related to coal mining and transportation. The community now sees tourism, small local business development, and strengthening connections to the Chattanooga and Nashville areas as key strategies for its economic development. This plan lays out action steps that will support each of these strategies.

Support Existing Communities

The action plan is focused on revitalizing Tracy City’s existing neighborhoods and assets such as the old high school, which was a key community centerpiece. This plan calls for restoring the old high school and improving walking and biking connections between neighborhoods and between Tracy City and neighboring communities.

Coordination and Leverage Federal Policies and Investment

The Tracy City Local Foods, Local Places workshop attracted an impressive array of local, state, and federal agency representatives. They were able to share knowledge during the workshop, meet potential new partners, and strengthen existing relationships. It is important moving forward for these partners to stay in contact.

Value Communities and Neighborhoods

The action plan recognized the importance of community to Tracy City’s social and economic well-being. The old high school was once a source of community strength and pride. This action plan provides a set of steps for moving forward and restoring the old high school as a new type of community facility that responds to Tracy City’s needs in 2015.

Appendices

- Appendix A – Action Plan Implementation Details
- Appendix B – Local and Regional Maps
- Appendix C – Key Health and Agriculture Data
- Appendix D – Workshop Participants

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- Appendix E – Funding Resources
- Appendix F – References
- Appendix G – Presentation Slides