

Engaging Heartland Residents: Rebuilding Pride, Ownership, and a Brighter Future

TRANSFORMING INDUSTRIAL HEARTLAND REGIONS OF NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE U.S. MIDWEST CONVENING & LEARNING EXCHANGE

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Summary Report
By: Lukas Hagen and Chelsea Gaylord

INTRODUCTION

Recent election results and research in the United States and across Europe indicate that democracy is on the minds of everyday citizens. While elections in Italy have swept right-wing governments into power, France staved off Marie Le Pen's Front National once again, and American voters denied Trump-supported candidates access to power, the role of voting patterns and economic development in European and American industrial heartlands has come under increased scrutiny.

These issues took front and center on November 11th, 2022 during a hybrid convening of international economic development practitioners and policy experts at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The event was the latest in a series of transatlantic learning exchanges for the [Transforming Industrial Regions Initiative](#). It was organized by the Michigan Economic Center, the [Weiser Diplomacy Center](#) and the [International Policy Center](#) at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan. The day-long event explored approaches and best practices for engaging residents of industrial heartland regions in order to address one of the root causes of polarizing politics undermining Western democracies and transatlantic relationships.

The convening in Ann Arbor was one stop on a 10-day study tour of US Midwest communities by American and European leaders to study effective, place-focused strategies for preventing antidemocratic movements from gaining a foothold. Study tour participants included policy professionals, economic development practitioners, and cross-sector experts from the US, United Kingdom (UK), Belgium, Italy, France, and Germany. The event in Ann Arbor served as a two part series for exchanging new research and insights. The morning featured three panels on meeting the attitudes, needs, and unique priorities of Heartland residents; supporting and catalyzing effective community change; and reflection on economic structural change in East and West Germany.

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Key figures in the conversations included:

- National security expert **Fiona Hill**, whose book “There is Nothing For You Here” tells her own story of growing up in one of England’s “left-behind” places;
- **Thomas Kralinski**, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labor & Transport, Saxony, East Germany;
- **Rachel Wolf**, Founding Partner of Public First and former Advisor to the British Prime Minister; and
- **Bob King**, former President of United Auto Workers International and representative of IG METALL on Opel Corporation Board of Directors.

Following the panels, approximately 30 transatlantic leaders and study tour participants reflected on lessons learned from their efforts at an in-person working session. They shared common themes that had emerged during the day and first half of the tour from visits to Pittsburgh and Erie, PA and Cleveland, OH.



Study tour members and Engaging Heartland Residents event speakers

MAJOR THEMES

Four major themes emerged from the day of discussion that built on conversations from previous exchanges and offered a new lens for approaching economic renewal and strengthening democracy. These were pride of place and heritage, resident-led change, revitalizing communities rather than replacing them, and shifting the economic development paradigm to a people-centered approach.

PRIDE IN PLACE IS ALIVE AND WELL

Robert Leonard, a journalist from Iowa, emphasized that residents of industrial heartlands are not victims, and do not see themselves as such. As Chelsea Gaylord mentioned from her interview with a United Auto Workers member, residents in heartland areas have a great desire to be seen, and thereby included in dialogues and discussions. Heartland residents are

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We are not victims.
-Robert Leonard

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capable of taking control of their economic fortune, if they are provided with access to resources and connectivity to the larger economy. Fiona Hill discussed how the community of Erie Pennsylvania had created an international speaker series and cross-generational exchange to tap into resident expertise in their own communities and give them a sense that they can solve their own problems.

Michael Schwarze-Rodrian, a former leader of the economic transformation in Germany's Ruhr Region from the 1990's to the 2010's, demonstrated the strengths that heartland regions continue to have. The Ruhr was the longtime industrial heart of Germany, where the economy was defined by steel production and coal mining. These industries began declining in the 1950's, with the last coal mine closing in 2017. However, connections to the mining and steel industry continue to define the region's identity.

The Ruhr region was awarded the title of Cultural Capital of Europe in 2010 (RUHR.2010), which helped transition it from a deficit to an asset mindset. The region is defined by a cluster of major metropolitan centers, which had previously competed for investors in the region, as each city faced similar economic problems. Awarding this title to the entire region saw the rival municipalities join in remarkable efforts to define their collective strengths. Among these events was a day-long street celebration on the Autobahn that connects the region, the A40. Titled Still-Leben (Still Life), the entire highway was shut down to motorized traffic for a day. Instead of vehicles, 30,000 picnic tables were joined end to end and people throughout Europe were invited to come have a picnic in the road.

The momentum of RUHR.2010 helped the region to transform the derelict mining and steel mills around the Emscher River into a nature preserve. By restoring vegetation on former tailings dumps, allowing the river to return to a natural course, and outfitting the region with a network of trails and activities, the architecture was brought back to a human scale from its previous industrial size.

While heartland communities face real challenges, residents are deeply proud of where they live and feel a connection to their communities. People want to be seen and acknowledged for their hard work. Conversations must shift from a deficit mindset to one that highlights the assets, resiliency, and vibrancy that outlasts economic and industrial cycles in these areas.

RESIDENTS CAN LEAD CHANGE

A central theme throughout the day was the need for economic development to be conducted from the bottom up, and that informed involvement and buy-in of the local population is the underpinning of any successful economic effort. Residents have the solutions to help us solve our challenges and support structures are needed to provide opportunities for heartland residents to emerge as leaders.

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Nothing about us without us.
-Tracie Potts

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Robert Leonard and Robin Johnson pointed to the lack of on ramps into political and economic life for residents in the rural Midwest. Political establishments have not been in the habit of recruiting candidates from rural areas, and the physical presence of regional and national politicians in these areas is also notably absent. While the Biden

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Administration recently invested in infrastructure in rural America through the Chips Act, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the Build Back Better Act, the administration did not seek dialogue with residents in these communities. Johnson recommended that leaders follow the example of Representative Ro Khanna, who has gone on listening tours through the Midwest to better understand the issue residents there face.

Chelsea Gaylord and Lukas Hagen, Master of Public Policy students at the University of Michigan, highlighted conversations with a representative from the United Auto Workers (UAW) on how labor unions are building local leadership and meeting people where they are. Union leaders emphasized the importance of connecting with members face to face even over the smallest acts of handing off union merchandise purchases in-person to build relationships and connections. Further, ensuring people have the information they need to make their own decisions was essential. Members were empowered to lead and make informed decisions by having access to live streamed negotiations and meetings. Through these sorts of engagement, they have advocated for better pay and benefits at electric vehicle facilities as the American Midwest enters a new era of transportation.

Leonard and Johnson also spoke of the importance of reliable information sources and localized institutions. Local news provides the community with the means to support one another and to stay abreast of local politics. Regional and national news does not cover the granular local issues that can help communities seize their fortunes. The disappearance of local newspapers in heartlands have left these communities without a collective voice. Leonard and Johnson pointed out that civic institutions, like local news and unions, can serve as filters for misinformation by providing local communities with a shared source of information.

Tracie Potts, Executive Director of the Eisenhower Institute, emphasized that the communities at the center of our conversation that day need to be in the room. It's not only important to bring them to the table but to also ensure they are part of the decision making process. She summarized her point with the mantra "Nothing about us without us," highlighting the role that residents must have in defining challenges and identifying solutions.

REVITALIZATION RATHER THAN REPLACEMENT

Discussion by Fiona Hill and research conducted in western Pennsylvania by a team at Gettysburg College's Eisenhower Institute highlighted resident concerns that economic changes taking place around them were happening to them rather than for them. As communities promote job creation and industries shift towards clean mobility and green energy, local leaders must be sure that residents are the primary beneficiaries of revitalization.

Hill discussed the concept of community wellbeing and how people feel a stronger sense of attachment to their original community. Communities frequently feel that when there is a regeneration of place, they get replaced and pushed out rather than revitalized.

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This issue was highlighted by Tracie Potts and a team of four students studying sociopolitical, economic, and international relations issues presented their findings from a series of tours and interviews they conducted in five former steel towns in western Pennsylvania in October 2022. They discovered that many of the communities they visited have changed over the past several decades, but long-time residents have been displaced and disconnected from the revitalization that their towns have experienced. Residents mentioned that the new economic development taking place in their hometowns tended to benefit either those living outside of the community and commuting in for work or that new neighborhoods had pushed former steel industry residents out into the surrounding area. This left holes in the social fabric, as no one spent both their free time and workdays there.

Without the benefits of economic development being dedicated to existing residents in towns like Aliquippa or Braddock, PA, there was a sense of being displaced. Additionally, residents were concerned about the environmental and health impacts of heavy industry, something they shared with England's rust belt population. While residents of former industrial areas on both sides of the Atlantic are in favor of new industries, they passionately feel that their involvement in economic planning over the last several decades has been insufficient and reflective of their needs.

The opportunities that green technology and growth offer for industrial revitalization were highlighted by both Rachel Wolf and Fiona Hill as means to regenerate workforce opportunities and satisfy community environmental concerns. Wolf highlighted how the attempts by the British government to marry environmental goals with aid and resources for industry is appearing to be effective. While investment must continue to play out for green industries to appear in meaningful ways, the government's strategy appears to be working because it both connects people to good jobs and provides a reason for their children to stay in the community. For rural communities, Robert Leonard emphasized the need to invest in farmers, ranchers, and foresters to sequester carbon and promote climate smart agriculture.

In ensuring that existing residents benefit from economic renewal and are not further left behind as industries rapidly evolve to meet climate demands, communities must leverage their existing assets and networks between foundations, businesses, and universities. The role of educational institutions in supporting workforce transitions as heavy industry declines was a prominent theme of discussion. Jörg Kemna, with Business Metropole Ruhr, highlighted how the Ruhr region began investing in universities and research when deindustrialization started in the 1950's, which allowed people who no longer faced a future in coal and steel to access a wider variety of careers. For communities without large, established universities, Sandra Hannig discussed the role that agriculture and life sciences programs, entrepreneurship and innovation centers, and extension offices can serve as educational opportunities for more remote places.

George Moroz of the Henry Ford Museum also discussed the importance of nurturing young talent. Through the museum's innovation conventions program, youth are provided opportunities to identify problems they want to solve, create and pitch a solution, and journal about their innovation journey. Ensuring access to capital and resources for business ideas were an essential element to leveraging the creative power of young people and innovation programs.

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SHIFTING THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM

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Talking about policy won't change if you don't go to the core issue of power.

-Bob King

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly severe effects of climate change are bringing into sharp definition the intersectionality of economic development, public health, and socioeconomic well-being, Fiona Hill noted. While the core elements of economic development in job creation and workforce remain, the scope is shifting around what economic development looks like in practice and who gets to benefit from it in industrial heartland communities.

Birgit Hassig, Chief of Staff at the Visible Hands Collective, a global NGO that specializes in community healing, spoke to the argument that economic development must be about the whole person. The mental and physical health of people have effects on the economy, and therefore economic development must take a more holistic focus. It's easier to put a tangible investment value on "place" oriented investments like brownfields or jobs than it is "people" oriented behavior and resistance to change. However, people, how they feel, and multigenerational experiences should be considered when investing in communities. In taking stock of a community's assets, people are central, and economic development must also consider the mental, physical, and biological well being of their "people" assets.

Sandra Hannig of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), pointed out that not all industrial heartlands are the same. England, the United States and Germany are unique culturally, politically, and economically. "Heartlands" is a single term for communities that are also each unique, and solutions that work in one place are not guaranteed to work in another. Each region needs tailor-made solutions. The solutions to half a century of economic disinvestment are complex and nuanced according to Florian Ranft of the Progressive Zentrum. The solutions to these issues need to start small and be scaled and adapted from one industrial zone to another.

In addition, redistributions of power and ownership can provide essential paths to economic mobility, resilience, and mitigate displacement. Providing opportunities for people to invest in their communities fosters a sense of ownership and lowering the barriers to homeownership are one way to build opportunity, according to Eric Scherzing of the Michigan Association of Land Banks. Bob King, former president of the UAW, spoke about the power differential between industrial workers and corporations and the role of unions in helping address systems of power and protecting democracy. He pointed out that CEOs on both sides of the Atlantic are equally focused on profits, but European workers are better supported through unions and a more robust welfare system. Therefore, they stand to lose less when they confront their employers' leadership or management.

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CONCLUSION

This event provided an overview of the direction economic development is going: internationally collaborative and ground-up. The discussions of the day were focused on how to conduct economic development in a way that is inclusive of resident input, as they would be the ones ultimately following through on the work. Providing just paths toward a transition to a renewable energy future that is innovative and restorative was at the top of speakers' minds.

Industrial heartland residents feel a deep sense of pride in place. Investing in support structures that distribute power to residents and make them part of the decision-making process will unlock bottom-up solutions and change in heartland communities.

As these regions transform, economic development practitioners must ensure that residents reap the benefits of renewal and are not displaced. Revitalization efforts need to be inclusive of legacy residents, those that have stuck with these communities in the past. Future development must serve them as well.

All this amounts to a shift in the paradigm of economic development: to shift the focus from bringing in business to cultivating and empowering existing businesses and entrepreneurs. Rather than leaning on legacy industries, economic development professionals can provide these regions with the means to take advantage of existing expertise.



Chelsea Gaylord and Lukas Hagen discuss takeaways from their interviews with labor union leadership

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ABOUT THE TRANSFORMING INDUSTRIAL REGIONS INITIATIVE

The Transforming Industrial Regions Initiative is a network of policy practitioners, academics, and political leaders focused on economic revival of industrial regions in North America and Europe. The initiative is a partnership of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Georgetown University's BMW Center for German and European Studies, the Michigan Economic Center, Policy@Manchester at the University of Manchester, the Ruhr-Konferenz, the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Chicago, and the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy of the European Commission.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Austin directs the [Michigan Economic Center](#), a center for ideas and network-building to advance Michigan's economic transformation. He also serves as a Non-Resident Senior Fellow with the Brookings Institution, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and the Upjohn Institute where he leads these organizations' efforts to support economic transformation in the American Midwest and in the industrial heartlands of Western democracies.

Lukas Hagen will graduate with a Masters in Public Policy from the University of Michigan in May 2023. His focus has been in international comparative local politics and policies. Before contributing to the Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative, he interned with the German Marshall Fund, focusing on their Cities Fortifying Democracy initiative. At the Ford School, he has analyzed Colombian climate change legislation and worked with informal settlements to improve their climate resilience. Prior to graduate school, he worked for Habitat for Humanity of Metro Denver for five years after completing two terms of national service with AmeriCorps NCCC. He holds a BS in urban planning from Michigan State University.

Chelsea Gaylord is a second year Master in Public Policy candidate at the University of Michigan with a focus on community and economic development policy and comparative international models. Prior to working with the Transforming Industrial Heartlands Initiative, she served as Senior Economic Development Specialist for the City of Colorado Springs where she led COVID-19 response and recovery, equitable redevelopment, and community investment initiatives. She has also worked with various stage startups across the U.S. and served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Uganda (2015-2017) where she founded a nation-wide program to support young Ugandan entrepreneurs.

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