



**Building Community and
Social Infrastructure:
A Critical Foundation for Local
Economic Regeneration**

By: Lavea Brachman, JD, MCP, and Meriem Hamioui

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What is social and community infrastructure, and why is it important?

In the wake of the recent U.S. presidential election, pundits, and policymakers across the political spectrum are evaluating the shape that investment policies and regeneration strategies for “left-behind” placesⁱ (LBP) should take over the next four years and beyond. These places, products of [decades of disinvestment](#), have been the focus of bipartisan attention in the U.S., the U.K., and other Western countries. In the U.S., many of the historic [set of federal place-based policies](#) passed by the U.S. Congress and implemented under the Biden administration (2021-2025), targeted disinvested places. Meanwhile, in the U.K., the Conservative and Labour Party governments have adopted various strategies to redress U.K. regional inequities and shore up left-behind places (variously labeled “[leveling up](#)” and “[devolution](#)” policies, depending on the political party in charge). Yet, traditional economic tools don’t address local challenges, leaving communities and their residents sidelined and struggling to absorb and maximize new investments.

Against a backdrop of political change but also an unusual surge of place-based policies, many that target left-behind places, a webinar event hosted by the Jefferson Educational Societyⁱⁱ explored the vital role of community and social infrastructure in addressing acute individual and community needs and boosting economic regeneration in post-industrial cities and regions. Social and community infrastructure – encompassing physical spaces, organizational networks, and supportive relationships – is broadly defined as, “the systems, institutions, and relationships that support the capacity of communities to solve problems, pursue shared goals, and foster well-being.”ⁱⁱⁱ The webinar panel focused on the critical role of strong and resilient community infrastructure to carry out deep and sustained transformation, which includes restoring pride, optimism, and resilience in overlooked regions and fostering hope and community – alongside implementing^{iv} economic development initiatives to spur regrowth and community wealth-building.^v

The discussion emphasized how an effort to strengthen and harness social and community infrastructure is essential to repair communities and bolster economic development infrastructure, including broadband, transportation, education, and workforce development. For communities and policymakers, the umbrella term, “social and community infrastructure,” can be helpfully broken into two types: “soft” infrastructure, such as leadership, social capital, and citizen engagement as well as that of local organizations; and “hard” infrastructure, which includes community centers, bars, parks, and other physical gathering places that provide space for interaction and the building of community cohesion and resilience. All together, these community-centered, bottom-up efforts can leverage top-down, place-based policy tools and investments while also empowering communities in post-industrial regions throughout the U.S. Midwest, Northern U.K., and parts of Europe.

What are the unique community challenges in left-behind places that are often overlooked and can derail economic recovery?

The disconnect between traditional policy solutions and unique community challenges was a dominant webinar theme. Standard community and economic development financing and investment tools are not structured, for instance, to address unraveled community fabric or to take on residents' physical, emotional, or mental health challenges or sense of disconnection from their own communities that beset many of these places.

The webinar surfaced common challenges in LBPs – lack of organizational capacity; weakened social bonds; disconnection between economic and workforce development and health challenges; and hollowed out local leadership and civic engagement – that require local attention to achieve deep, long-lasting, and meaningful transformation in these places. Otherwise, well-intentioned traditional solutions and place-based policies are likely to falter.

- **Building depleted organizational capacity:** Strengthening the ability of local organizations to coordinate efforts, secure funding, and implement policies is essential for long-term transformation. In the U.S., these include primarily nonprofit organizations spearheading economic and workforce development, job training, affordable housing, transportation as well as health and human services. In the U.K., there is a similar, parallel set of organizations, although a greater number are likely to be primarily public sector-funded.
- **Restoring weakened social bonds:** Facilitating community gatherings, trust-building activities, and inclusive spaces that reconnect residents and foster collective action are all part of restoring social bonds. Weakened social bonds have been documented at multiple levels and age groups in these communities.^{vi} Webinar panelists particularly noted the devastating impact of attenuated social ties on communities' youth populations. Addressing the “acute fraying of community” requires a laser focus on augmenting education and youth empowerment to activate young peoples' potential as change-makers. “One of the biggest issues ... expressed to us was the fact that so many youth from these communities are leaving because they don't see any opportunity in the places where they are ... When there is new infrastructure and new markets coming in, they don't have the educational resources or educational levels to jump into the job market. So, there is essentially nothing left in the communities in which they grew up,” one webinar panelist observed.^{vii}
- **Addressing economic disconnection:** The lack of integration among health, social, and economic development initiatives is a significant barrier to holistic community regrowth and economic growth, although experts acknowledge the difficulty of operationalizing this integration. For instance, addressing mental health, substance use disorder, and overall well-being requires a comprehensive strategy that combines resources, community-level

support, and trust-building efforts. Without an intentional integrated approach, narrowly prescribed investments in one area miss opportunities to bridge the gap between economic development and community health priorities. For instance, webinar panelists pointed to [loneliness](#) as the canary in the coal mine (particularly acute in places with an aging demographic), auguring loss of social connection and a prime example of a challenge disconnected from economic tools, which, if left unresolved, prevents people from entering the workforce along with other negative repercussions. One panelist stated, “Loneliness is a crucial topic [of debate] in Germany ... because we are in an aging society. On a local level, it causes mental health problems. One strategy to overcome rising health problems at the local level is to try to support people to take action or to form communities that care. But we need social infrastructure on the local level [to] strengthen community ... trust among people, and the quality of neighborhoods ... while also taking care of vulnerable groups.”^{viii} Solutions to health issues are not rooted in the medical system alone.

- **Developing local and civic leadership:** A lack of meaningful public engagement in decision-making processes in these LBPs often leaves them without supportive leaders who understand the unique needs of their communities and can advocate for and implement tailored policies. Fostering effective public engagement relies on creating inclusive spaces where residents can respectfully exchange diverse viewpoints. Panelists highlighted the importance of physical places for public forums and informal civic education as tools for building social capital, promoting civic participation, and involving communities in governance. Threshold challenges, such as accessing information and addressing varying levels of public trust, need to be addressed to ensure that engagement is meaningful and representative.

Many of these challenges are also a function of macro-trends, such as depopulation (e.g. people fleeing these communities where they see no future for themselves), that cannot be reversed overnight, leading to further fraying of social bonds, weakening civic engagement and local leadership, and a spiral downward in local capacity. So, these communities face a paradox: while community capacity is limited to take on these community development problems, resources are also scarce to bolster this capacity. At the same time, decreased public funding for local services means further decline of social infrastructure at the very moment when adequate services are needed most. But enhanced capacity — which, optimally, strengthens community infrastructure, responds to acute resident needs, and acts as a co-determinant of successful economic regrowth strategies — is exactly what is needed to increase the likelihood of more sustainable turnarounds.

So how do communities escape the trap of this Catch-22 cycle to advance toward recovery, and where are the intervention points? These post-industrial communities have historically been endowed with rich social infrastructure, such as physical spaces where communities can gather, as well as strong networks and relationships. *So how do communities regain that social infrastructure?*

Recommendations Moving Forward

Scaling and building community and social infrastructure as part of the solution

The panel discussion underscored the critical role of local leadership and of growing both “soft” and “hard” community infrastructure to revitalize rural and urban post-industrial communities. Even in these uncertain political times, unprecedented opportunities exist to leverage national place-based policies as a vehicle to rebuild community infrastructure. Residents can utilize social infrastructure to take advantage of national place-based policies (e.g. the [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) in the U.S. or new workforce training strategies being implemented by, for example, the [Greater Manchester](#) and [North East](#) Combined Authorities in the wake of U.K. devolution policies) that invest in tangible infrastructure, such as accessible broadband, reliable transportation networks, and workforce and education systems, aiming to connect residents with economic opportunities. These national policies require strong and resilient local infrastructure — such as strengthened community colleges in the U.S. and higher-capacity furthering education institutions in the U.K.) that have historically faced significant underfunding and structural hurdles to meet the diverse needs of local populations. Ultimately, these efforts rely on communities assuming greater agency to take on their own recovery and provide direct input to revitalization strategies, continuing to build on the positive momentum of targeted place-based investments. The panel highlighted the importance of empowering local leaders to tailor community-driven solutions and harness social infrastructure for true and sustainable regrowth.

In response to the panel’s discussion of the types of local challenges that can impede recovery, the authors have constructed, as a starting point, a paradigm to aid in solving local challenges, leveraging local attributes, and setting a path toward community recovery:

- **Acknowledge the importance of community and social infrastructure.** Social infrastructure has largely been left out of national U.S. policy structures or calculation of how to maximize local impact. A notable exception under the Biden Administration was the [U.S. Department of Commerce’s Build Back Better Regional Challenge \(BBBRC\) program](#), in which building community infrastructure was essentially integrated into the program prescriptions – with local or regional backbone nonprofit organizations required in the local proposals as coordinating entities. [Early interim case study analysis of the BBBRC program implementation](#) points to some early community-building wins. However, these BBBRC awards represent relatively small amounts of funding over a comparatively short three-year term, so the jury is still out on their long-term effectiveness in building and leaving behind new community infrastructure. In the U.K., connected to the policy constructs of [devolution](#) and [leveling up](#), regional governing structures, called [Combined Authorities](#) (CA), have been endowed with increased implementation powers. While wide variability across the CAs exists and differentiation among the mayors and communities in their approaches and effectiveness to build “bottom up” local and community capacity, highlighting social and community infrastructure and organizations as critical partners in local rebuilding is a step forward.

- **Address health and economic gaps together.** Panelists advocated for integrating health, social, and economic development initiatives, noting that addressing mental health, substance use disorder, and well-being require community-level support and trust-building efforts. Economic and health policies and practices — or their advocates — rarely intersect on either the local or national levels. So fostering greater collaboration between health initiatives and economic development addressing the administrative separation between social services and economic opportunities would be an advancement. This effort requires breaking down silos and creating integrated strategies that tackle interconnected issues like mental health, substance use disorder, and economic inequality. A stellar example of a holistic approach to well-being is a Carnegie, U.K. initiative captured in a [well-being framework for the North of Tyne region](#).^{ix}
- **Adapt infrastructure to local needs and empower community-based initiatives.** This entails empowering communities with the tools and authority to shape policies that address their specific challenges and ensure that national policies are tailored to the unique needs of each community. Empowering communities with increased civic capacity is central, allowing them to lead their own regeneration efforts that leverage economic development policies. For instance, the [Jefferson Educational Society's investments in regeneration and civic leadership](#) initiatives in Erie, Pennsylvania's under-resourced communities equip community members with tools to actively lead their own revitalization while also restoring pride and resilience. A significant return on investment can come from state and national policymakers providing smaller communities with resources to compete fairly with larger cities^x and with capacity to tailor resources and foster their development – empowering communities to organize themselves and prioritize their own needs – all crucial for sustainable transformation. While medium-sized post-industrial cities may lack sufficient resources, recovery hurdles are further magnified in even more depleted smaller cities and towns.
- **Align policy initiatives with community cohesion strategies.** Effective policy solutions need to be grounded in community realities. Prioritizing community voice and engagement and community-led solutions is an essential step to achieving lasting transformation and creating inclusive and equitable growth. Community-informed solutions that involve listening to and trusting local voices are vital for sustainable and equitable development. For instance, the webinar highlighted the role of public forums and informal education to build social capital, promote adult education, and foster community involvement – particularly engaging and educating youth on issues affecting their communities and enhancing education opportunities to prepare them as future change agents and leaders in community cohesion. Initiatives like [Gettysburg College's student community projects](#) illustrate how youth involvement can drive long-term regeneration and intergenerational knowledge-sharing.

A precondition for regrowth and a more secure future in these disinvested communities, then, is scaling organizational capacity, cementing local community networks, and growing “soft” and “hard” local infrastructure. In the end, panelists agreed that community-building efforts go beyond

policy expertise. The proliferation of place-based approaches is a positive step forward and should be applauded, yet residents do not just want top-down policies “imposed” on them — and not be “done to” by others — but also value opportunities to fix things for themselves in ways that leverage these targeted policies. This sentiment, echoed in findings from other [studies of left-behind places](#), makes the best case for sharpening our understanding of local needs and challenges and shoring up bottom-up community capacity and transformation tools.

This article, based on a webinar, involved the following participants:

- **Lavea Brachman**, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution and Visiting Fellow, University College London (facilitator).
- **Dr. Ferki Ferati**, President, Jefferson Education Society, an Erie, Pennsylvania-based think tank and leader of powerful citizen engagement work in this industrial community.
- **Kat Manchester**, Student researcher, Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College Heartlands Project, Gettysburg, PA.
- **Dr. Sebastian Kurtenbach**, Professor of Political Science/ Social Policy, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany.
- **John Tomaney**, Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, University College, London, U.K.; and author and architect of community social infrastructure building efforts in numerous U.K. communities.

References

[I] Ron Martin, Ben Gardiner, Andy Pike, Peter Sunley, Peter Tyler. *Levelling up Left Behind Places: The Scale and Nature of the Economic and Policy Challenge*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2022

[II] This article is based on a October 24, 2024 webinar hosted by the [Jefferson Educational Society](#), a think-tank based in Erie, Pennsylvania, as part of the [Heartlands Transformation Network](#).

[III] John Tomaney, leading scholar and practitioner in the field of social infrastructure and a webinar participant, defined social infrastructure as “the connective tissue that binds communities together, particularly in regions grappling with economic transitions.” John Tomaney, Maeve Blackman, Lucy Natarajan, Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Myfanwy Taylor. *Social infrastructure and left behind Places*.” Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. 2024.

[IV] While not a central focus of this webinar, the discussants pointed out that these communities and their residents may be experiencing a sense of hopelessness that can translate into populist political messages and impulses.

[V] While not a central focus of this webinar, the discussants pointed out that these communities and their residents may be experiencing a sense of hopelessness that can translate into populist political messages and impulses.

[VI] Robert Putnam. “The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Co it Again.” Simon and Schuster. 2020. Tomaney et al.

[VII] Kat Manchester, Student researcher, Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College Heartlands Project, Gettysburg, PA.

[VIII] Dr. Sebastian Kurtenbach, Professor of Political Science/ Social Policy, Ruhr University Bochum, Germany.

[IX] The Carnegie UK approach is based on a model which recognizes that the building blocks of a good life are not just about money, but about a complex interplay of factors. Collective well-being only happens where social, economic, environmental, and democratic (SEED) wellbeing elements are given equal weight.

[X] Ferki Ferati, President, Jefferson Education Society. The unequal distribution of resources between larger cities and smaller communities was recognized as a major hurdle, with smaller communities often lacking the financial means to thrive. Ferati offered a powerful analogy, noting that “a place like Erie, Pennsylvania is competing for federal funding with places like Chicago, Los Angeles. It's like sending a high school team to compete with NBA players, we're losing, and therefore we turn around and find the smaller communities that we're beating.”

About the Authors

Lavea Brachman, nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and Visiting Fellow at University College London, lives in Ohio.

Meriem Hamioui is a Fellow with the Eisenhower Institute and an International student from Morocco at Gettysburg College, where she is majoring in international political economy and International Affairs.

The [Heartlands Transformation Network](#) is a transatlantic collaborative partnership dedicated toward closing geographic economic divides and reconnecting residents of rural and former industrial heartland communities to economic opportunity. The initiative works to return community pride and optimism about the future, and diminish the appeal of polarizing, resentment-driven, isolationist and ethnonationalist political movements that threaten our democracies.

The initiative, its learning exchanges, convenings, events, study tours, presentations, publications, and other learning products, are conducted with partners including the Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College, the Brookings Institution; the Georgetown University BMW Center for German and European Studies; the Jefferson Educational Society; the Ruhrkonferenz of North-Rhine Westphalia; Policy Manchester at the University of Manchester, U.K.; the University Allianz Ruhr; the German Consulate General in Chicago; the University of Michigan; the European Commission Directorate of Regional and Urban Policy; and the Committee of the Regions of the European Union, among others.