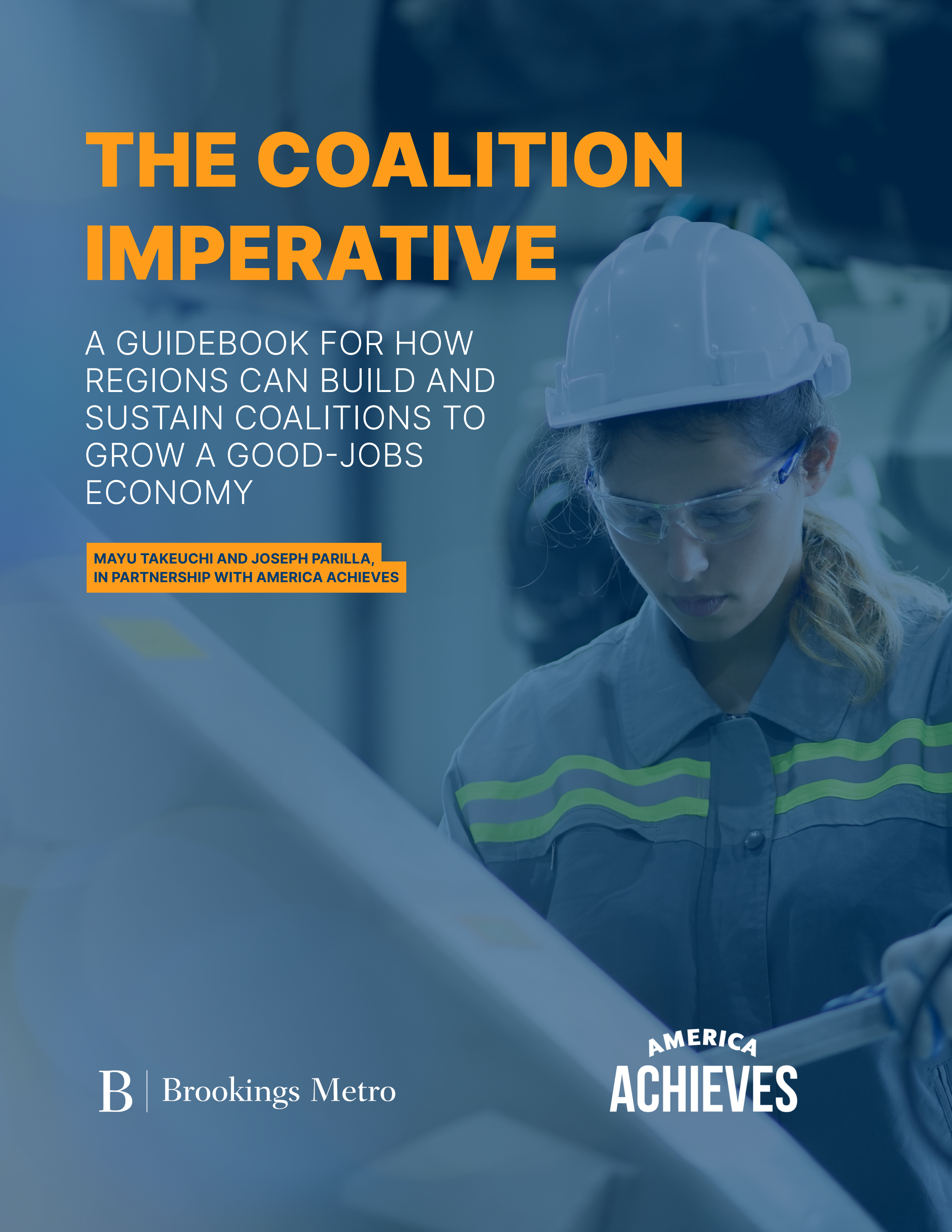

THE COALITION IMPERATIVE

A GUIDEBOOK FOR HOW REGIONS CAN BUILD AND SUSTAIN COALITIONS TO GROW A GOOD-JOBS ECONOMY

MAYU TAKEUCHI AND JOSEPH PARILLA,
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AMERICA ACHIEVES

Brookings Metro

AMERICA ACHIEVES

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NOVEMBER 2025

ABOUT THESE ORGANIZATIONS

Brookings Metro's mission is to collaborate with local leaders to transform original insights into policy and practical solutions that scale nationally. In service of this mission, we produce trusted, actionable research, apply it through regional engagements and national networks, and connect with policymakers at all levels to drive impact at scale.

America Achieves is a national nonprofit organization working to help local communities and states ensure everyone has a clear path to a good job, no matter who they are, where they live, and whether or not they have a college degree. Our Good Jobs Economy initiative partners with states, regions, and local workforce and economic development intermediaries to design, fund, and implement the programs, strategies, and systems that create sustainable pathways to good jobs. As part of this Good Jobs Economy initiative, America Achieves is partnering with the National Governors Association to modernize state talent systems that support the workforce efforts of regional coalitions.

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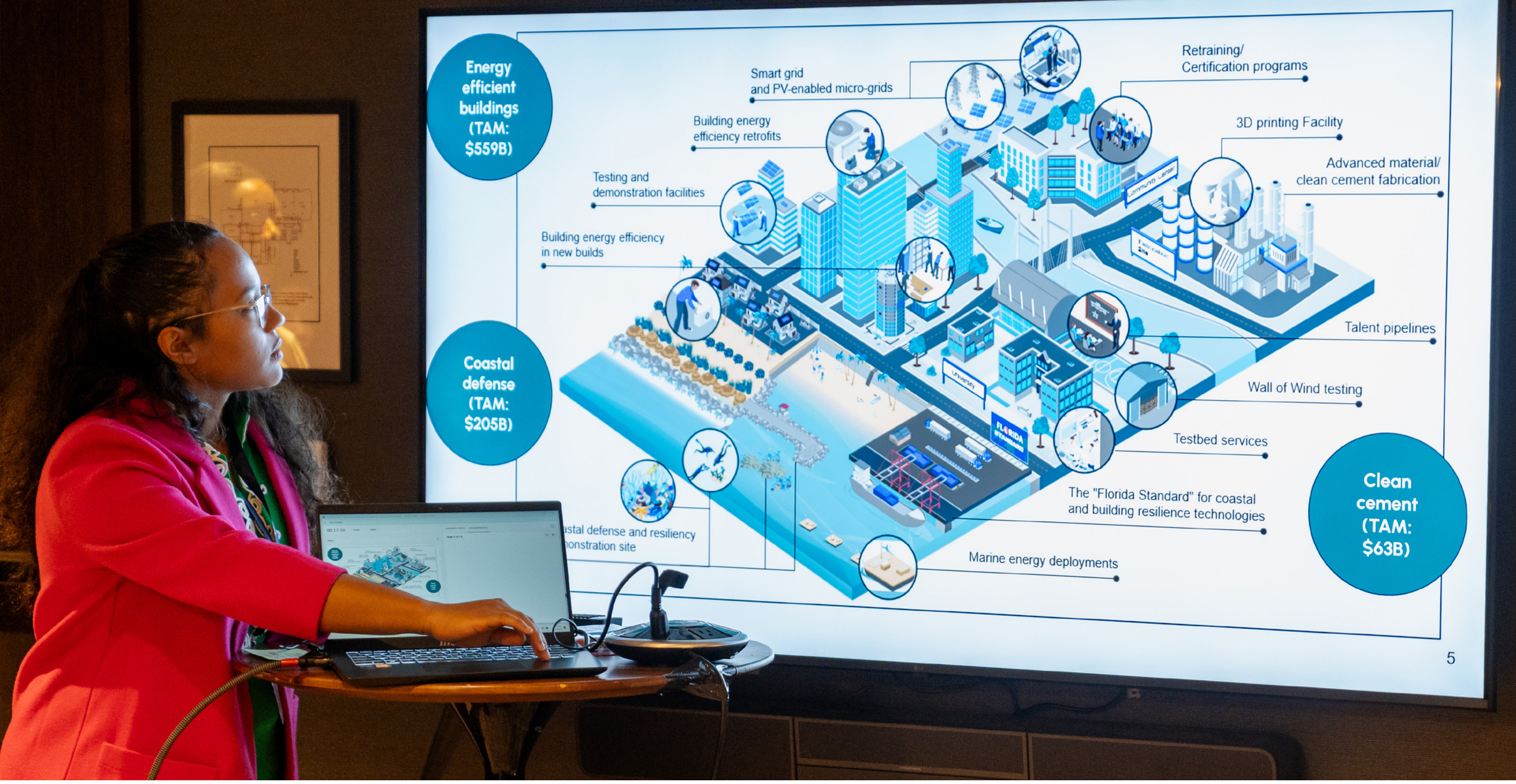


America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort. | Photo credit: America Achieves

Executive summary

Across the United States, regional leaders face a pressing mandate to grow good jobs and expand economic mobility for all residents. But no single organization has the knowledge, influence, and resources to deliver on this mandate alone. Cross-sector coalitions—public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic actors working together on a shared, transformative vision that integrates talent, innovation, and placemaking strategies—offer a compelling approach. Both theory and practice show that when managed well, cross-sector coalitions can help regions achieve greater strategic alignment, resource efficiency, and economic resilience. This evidence has led to a growing adoption of coalition-based strategies across the nation, partly enabled by recent federal policies that incentivized the formation of these place-based coalitions. But gaps remain: While local and regional leaders recognize the value of collaboration, the work of aligning priorities and initiatives across organizations with divergent incentives—all to deliver meaningful outcomes—is often messy and time-consuming.

The purpose of this report is to help leaders working in government, higher education, community organizations, philanthropy, and the private sector build and sustain effective cross-sector coalitions that grow good jobs and improve pathways to economic mobility.

The report draws on a nine-month collaboration between America Achieves, Brookings Metro, and 11 regional coalitions—incorporating interviews, site visits, and peer learning from practical discussions and exchanges. It distills lessons for regional practitioners, investors, and policymakers into five foundational building blocks of cross-sector coalitions (aimed primarily at local and regional leaders), as well as five implications for the future of place-based economic policy (aimed primarily at policymakers and investors).

FIVE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR CROSS-SECTOR COALITIONS

To turn collaboration into outcomes, every cross-sector coalition needs a clear foundation. The five building blocks listed below define how coalitions move from vision to results.

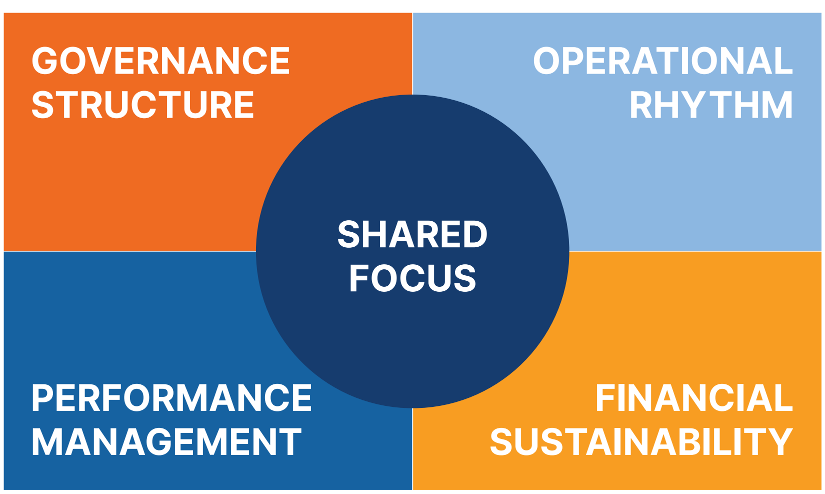
1. **Shared focus:** Clear, long-term North Star vision, goals, and outcomes defining the potential big win for the coalition's work, with intermediate priorities.
2. **Governance structure:** Established coalition leadership and membership structure with defined roles and responsibilities.
3. **Operational rhythm:** Processes for distributed decisionmaking, strategic implementation, and stakeholder engagement.
4. **Performance management:** Capacity to establish baseline data, then set appropriately actionable metrics and targets to track and communicate short-, medium-, and long-term progress, driving strategic and operational outcomes.
5. **Financial sustainability:** A financial model that blends and braids public, commercial, philanthropic, and other capital sources to sustain the strategy.

FIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF PLACE-BASED ECONOMIC POLICY

The experiences of regional coalitions suggest that government funding can play a uniquely critical role in driving outcomes at scale by:

1. **Incentivizing long-term strategic alignment**, including with priority industry sectors and high-level objectives for growing good jobs and economic mobility.
2. **Investing in strategic convening** to reduce barriers to cross-sector collaboration throughout strategic planning, project development, and execution.
3. **Funding data and accountability systems** to track regional progress toward stated goals and ensure outcomes-focused performance management.
4. **De-risking private investment** by funding critical pre-competitive shared assets (e.g., planning, public goods, coordination, etc.) that crowd in co-investment from other sectors.
5. **Conveying credibility to regional strategies** through competitive planning and grant award processes, thus validating a region's competitive advantages.

Five building blocks of governance for an effective regional coalition



BOX 1

Key terms used in this report

Advanced industries: Industries characterized by high concentrations of research and development and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) workers. These industries disproportionately offer good jobs compared to locally serving industries (see this Brookings report for further discussion).

Backbone: An institution or dedicated capacity within a larger institution focused on providing a strategic coordination function, building the durable civic infrastructure and collaborative muscle of a coalition. This can exist in a range of institution types, including regional economic development organizations, nonprofits, and other civic organizations.

Cross-sector coalition: A group of institutions—and in practice, representatives from them—across government, business, higher education, nonprofit service providers, philanthropy, and other key institutions across sectors working on a shared economic strategy.

Coalition governance: The combination of: 1) instituting and maintaining formal rules, structures, and processes; and 2) shaping the informal norms and power dynamics that define a coalition's way of working.

Good job: A job that pays wages that allow a worker to, at minimum, cover the local cost of living (see this Brookings report for further discussion).

Place-based economic policy: Policies that seek to improve economic outcomes by targeting specific geographies, often through incentives and investments, to activate assets within them.

Regional economic transformation: Also referred to as "transformative" or "market-shaping" strategies, this is the process of shifting the long-term trajectory of a region's economy toward better jobs and higher-value industries, ultimately increasing productivity and expanding economic mobility

Wisconsin Biohealth Tech Hub's in-person consortium workshop in Milwaukee in August 2024. | Photo credit: America Achieves

Why regional coalitions matter to national economic growth and prosperity

ECONOMIC DIVERGENCE AND PLACE-BASED POLICIES TO ADDRESS IT

Americans want to live and work in a nation where every community has the resources and opportunity to thrive. Yet local economic conditions are highly variable, with significant consequences for upward mobility. Recent research from Harvard economist Raj Chetty and colleagues finds that raising a county's employment rate is the strongest predictor of improved economic mobility for low-income children over time.

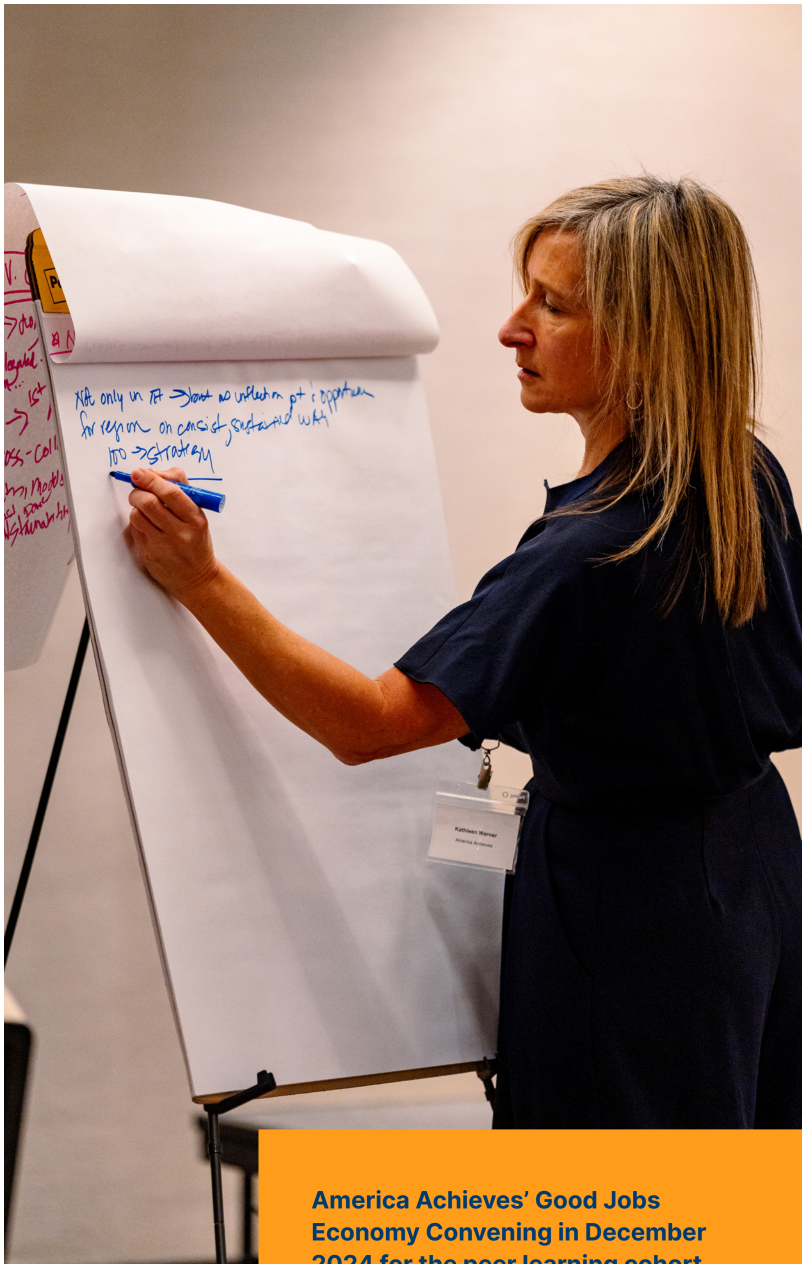
Broad forces shape this uneven geographic landscape of economic opportunity. The dual trends of globalization and technological change have concentrated economic growth and innovation in a handful of regions while leaving too many other places behind. While growth diverges *across* regions, public and private disinvestment has concentrated poverty *within* regions, reinforcing barriers that prevent residents of low-income neighborhoods from accessing and contributing to good jobs in the most innovative, fastest-growing parts of the economy. This inequality within and across regions has profound consequences: not only limiting economic opportunity, but also weakening trust in institutions and fueling political discontent.

In recent years, federal place-based policies offered one path for delivering inclusive growth in more places across the country. Brookings Metro has tracked a $40 billion portfolio of place-based economic investments, including targeted incentives and regional challenge grants, designed to strengthen national security, build supply chain resilience, enable the energy transition, and spur economic mobility—all by activating assets and competitive advantages in regions across the country. (Table 1 shows the relevant challenge grants within this portfolio.) Importantly, these public investments complement hundreds of billions of dollars in private investments in key advanced industries such as semiconductors, energy, and advanced pharmaceuticals, which are critical for the nation's competitiveness and disproportionately generate good jobs compared to locally serving industries.

Today, dozens of regions are leveraging these catalytic public and private investments to advance transformative, market-shaping strategies—those that shift the long-term trajectory of a region's economy toward better jobs and higher-value industries, ultimately expanding economic mobility. While many of these efforts were catalyzed by recent federal programs, many also trace their roots to prior iterations of regional collaboration. As Joe Stefko, the leader of the Buffalo-Rochester-Syracuse Tech Hub coalition recalls:

"We had a lot of long-standing collaborations, including in New York state's regional economic development councils. And we spent a year and a half before CHIPS and Science was signed into law, doing the blocking and tackling work to build relationships [across Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse] so that when it was passed into law, and when the Tech Hubs program was funded, we had already built the scaffolding for a strong partnership. If we had waited until late 2022, early 2023 to start those conversations, it would have really hamstrung us."

Moving forward, as the federal government continues making place-based investments to advance national priorities (and as state and regional leaders also explore paths to boosting economic mobility), the experiences of these regions offer critical lessons for policymakers and implementers.



America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort
Photo credit: America Achieves

TABLE 1

Place-based economic policy programs referenced in this report

Program	Description	Authorization	Appropriation	Implementing agency
Build Back Better Regional Challenge (BBBRC)	Funds a two-phase competition for regional coalitions pursuing integrated projects to transform local communities and strengthen regional economic resilience.	$1 billion	$1 billion	Economic Development Administration
Good Jobs Challenge	Supports regional workforce training systems to establish sectoral partnerships that train and place workers in good jobs.	$525 million	$525 million	Economic Development Administration
Regional Innovation Engines	Funds a two-phase competition to support the creation of cross-sector coalitions to advance research and development in key technology focus areas, including development awards to lay the groundwork for regional coalitions to submit successful proposals.	Up to $6.5 billion	$206 million	National Science Foundation
Regional Technology and Innovation Hubs (Tech Hubs)	Funds a two-phase competition for regional cross-sector coalitions, focused on technology development, job creation, and expanding U.S. innovation capacity. Intended to create 20 geographically distributed "regional technology and innovation hubs" in areas that are not leading technology centers.	$10 billion	$1 billion	Economic Development Administration

SOURCE: Brookings analysis of the American Rescue Plan Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and relevant program documents. Program descriptions are taken from that program's documentation. This content appeared earlier in Brookings' Foundations of regional economic transformation (Table 1) and first appeared in Brookings' Breaking down an $80 billion surge in place-based industrial policy (Table 1) and Sizing and seizing Washington's $40 billion down payment on place-based industrial policy (Table 2).

THE COALITION IMPERATIVE

No single organization has the knowledge, perspective, influence, and resources to deliver on the mandate of growing good jobs and expanding economic mobility alone. Delivering on this transformative mission requires regional leaders to organize into **cross-sector coalitions**. The term "cross-sector coalition" refers to a group of institutions—and in practice, representatives from them—across government, business, higher education, nonprofit service providers, philanthropy, and other key institutions across sectors working on a shared economic strategy. Coalitions may be more centralized, with members comprising the board of a 501(c)(3) or some other legal entity set up to provide a **backbone** or strategic coordination function (see "The role of backbone organizations" sidebar). Others may be more decentralized, with representatives connected to each other by grants or partnership agreements, while one member provides the backbone function.

The point is that a cross-sector coalition is not one organization—it helps align priorities, initiatives, and resources *across* organizations, so that their impact is greater than the sum of their parts. Cross-sector coalitions operationalize the old adage, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

Thus, coalitions often become the starting point to deliver regional economic change, and many federal place-based policies incentivized a coalitional approach. This policy design built on years of academic and practice research showing that coalitions help align a region's institutions to generate greater scaled impact, stretch scarce resources further, and provide the adaptive civic resilience that helps regions seize opportunities and weather economic and policy shocks. In the context of workforce efforts, coalitions that include employers and training providers better align labor supply with employer demand.

Coalitions can also help strengthen the complex civic networks that, as urban economist Michael Storper argues in "Keys to the City," ultimately shape the long-term success of a regional economy. And as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has shown based on international best practices research, coalitions can unlock the combined knowledge, resources, influence, and capabilities of leaders and organizations across the public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors. Recent research supported by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative shows that while effective coalitions may vary in structure, the common key to success is their ability to turn setbacks into opportunities for mutual learning and joint problem-solving.

For these reasons, regional leaders on the ground intuitively understand the need for these modernized forms of multi-organizational collaboration. It is rarely a challenge of awareness, but of incentives, resources, and delivery capacity. As one Brookings report put it, "even pioneers in the field face many barriers to implementation. Local leaders typically lack the resources and organizational capacity to plan well, coordinate across actors, and respond to a patchwork of rural, tribal, and place-based programs alongside other state or philanthropic resources."

While cross-sector coalitions provide a vital mechanism for aligning priorities and resources, they are inherently difficult to create and even harder to sustain. They can be messy, time-consuming, and often marked by friction. Thus, cross-sector coalitions tend to emerge informally and, if they find traction, often evolve to more durable institutional forms, such as civic partnerships, industry cluster organizations, and workforce sector partnerships.

BOX 2

The role of backbone organizations

Tackling issues as complex as growing economic opportunity and mobility requires a coalition-based approach. And that, in turn, demands intentional work to ensure that the coalition is more than a set of organizations listed together on a proposal, sitting in the same room to share quarterly updates. While often called "convening," the work requires "purposeful creation and management of civic networks in service of a shared economic strategy," as Brookings Metro explored in a recent report. This often invisible work of building durable civic infrastructure is what it takes to sustain progress.

A region does not necessarily need to create a new, purpose-built backbone entity specifically for growing economic mobility and opportunity. For example, in the example of **Central Indiana** discussed below, it was instead a business leadership and economic development entity that evolved to take on a backbone function for the region's economic strategy, given its credibility with business and industry leaders and substantial philanthropic support from Lilly Endowment Inc.; over time, it has also seeded four sector-specific backbone entities (one for each of the region's four key industries) to coordinate stakeholders across business and industry, universities, and civic leadership. At its core, this dedicated backbone capacity includes subject-matter expert staff, project management professionals, and other resources dedicated to the work of aligning strategic priorities, funding, and execution across sectors with the region's broader long-term vision and strategy.

As regional leaders observed in interviews, there are three situations in which establishing a new backbone entity can be particularly valuable:

1. Geography: The regional strategy straddles multiple geographic jurisdictions and there is not an existing, trusted entity that serves that full footprint.

2. Agility: The coalition's backbone function currently resides in a large, bureaucratic institution (e.g., a university or county government), which may have offered unique assets at the grant application stage, but may hinder the coalition's ability to be nimble as it begins implementation.

3. Independence: The coalition's backbone function is led by an institution that is not generally viewed as independent from particular government or business interests, which may expose the coalition to risks in sustainability that come with elections and economic cycles.

If a coalition meets one or more of these criteria, other regions' experiences suggest that it could benefit from establishing a new, dedicated backbone entity.

For example, in the case of **Montana's** Headwaters Tech Hub, coalition lead Tim VanReken described the following rationale for establishing a new 501(c)(3) with an independent board: "We wanted a backbone organization that was going to be able to act independently, not anchored too tightly to any one existing organization. It was important to be perceived as an independent, strategic actor that is really truly representing a coalition."

BOX 2 CONTINUED

Meanwhile, the **El Paso-West Texas** coalition is in the process of transitioning its backbone function from the University of Texas at El Paso to El Paso Makes, founded in 2023 as a local subsidiary of the nonprofit National Center for Defense Manufacturing and Machining. The transition not only "embeds the coalition in the national ecosystem of defense manufacturing," according to Susie Byrd, the former lead of the coalition, but also enables the coalition's backbone—and thus the coalition itself—to "be more agile and responsive to market opportunities, which can be hard to do within a large public institution."

Such an entity may be as lean as two to three full-time equivalents at the start, with the flexibility and autonomy to drive and sustain the shared regional strategy as well as adequate administrative capacity for project and data management. But as the coalition matures and evolves, the backbone's staff size and organizational design and structure must also evolve accordingly—an important set of topics for further research.

This evolution—from responding to federal funding opportunities to sustaining coalitional work—was the central motivation for the 11 regions participating in **America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Peer Learning Cohort** (PLC). The PLC, which was held between October 2024 and June 2025, aimed to provide practical guidance and peer support to help regions overcome three common sets of challenges facing coalition-based approaches:

- **Institutional misalignment:** Coalition-based work requires collaborating across organizations operating with divergent incentives, mandates, priorities, capabilities and capacities, stakeholders, geographic footprints, and timelines, often compounded by power imbalances and legacies of distrust and competition.
- **Systemic disincentives:** Traditional practices of funders, policymakers, and powerbrokers often reinforce siloes; as a key example, short-term, project-based funding streams from government, philanthropy, and corporations can make collaboration unnecessarily complicated.
- **Leadership fragility:** Coalitions often rely on a few collaborative, trusted, and charismatic leaders committed to delivering on the shared vision. While effective in the short term, this reliance leaves coalitions vulnerable to inevitable leadership transitions.

To address these challenges, the PLC's central objective was to help participating regions strengthen **coalition governance.** Coalition governance involves the combination of: 1) instituting and maintaining *formal* rules, structures, and processes; and 2) shaping the *informal* norms and power dynamics that define a coalition's way of working. Unlike governance within a single organization, coalition governance is multi-organizational and requires adaptive processes that enable partners to:

- **Coordinate and align** different institutions, needs, and incentives.
- **Build trust** among diverse stakeholders.
- **Solve problems** as they arise and evolve.
- **Sustain collaboration** toward its shared long-term goals.

In 2024 and 2025—through a combination of site visits, one-on-one technical assistance, and cohort-wide exchange sessions—America Achieves helped regions collaboratively tackle critical governance questions, advanced tangible coalition progress, and strengthened peer relationships between and within participating regions. Drawing on concepts advanced by America Achieves and Brookings Metro and the experiences of regions in the PLC and other leading regions that shared best practices with PLC members, the next section presents a practical guide to the five building blocks that regional coalitions need to be effective. Together, these building blocks provide a roadmap for leaders seeking to strengthen collaborative governance to align diverse stakeholders and sustain cross-sector partnerships capable of driving long-term economic growth and opportunity in their regions.

MAP 1

Map of regions represented in the Good Jobs Economy Peer Learning Cohort

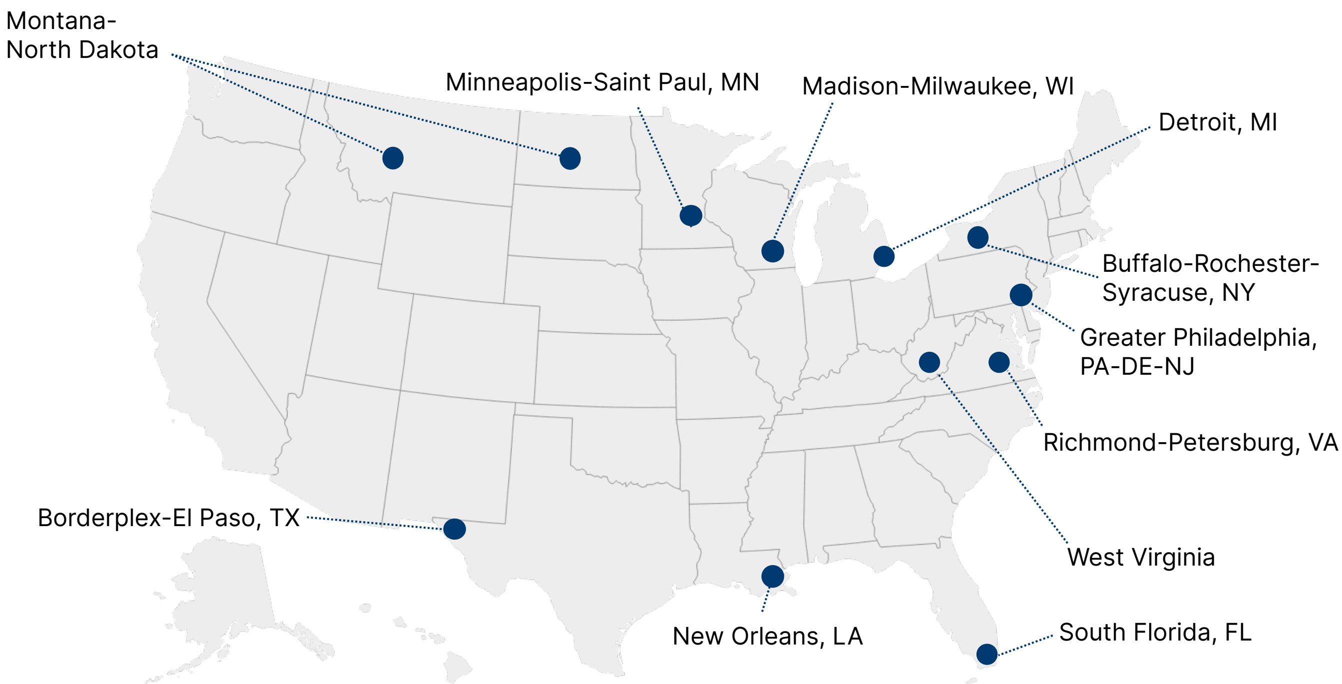


TABLE 2

Regional coalitions in the Good Jobs Economy Peer Learning Cohort

Geography	Lead organization(s) in Peer Learning Cohort	Priority sector(s)	Federal awards received*	Federal funding amount
Detroit	Detroit Regional Partnership	Advanced mobility	BBBRC	$52 million
El Paso and West Texas	University of Texas at El Paso (in transition)	Aerospace and defense manufacturing	BBBRC	$40 million
Greater Philadelphia, Penn.-Del.-N.J.	Tech Council of Delaware	Life sciences, health care, infrastructure, energy	Good Jobs Challenge, Tech Hubs designation	$23 million
Richmond-Petersburg, Va.	Virginia Biotechnology Research Partnership Authority	Advanced pharmaceutical manufacturing	Tech Hubs designation, BBBRC, Good Jobs Challenge, Regional Innovation Engines development award	$58 million
South Florida	Miami-Dade County	Disaster recovery infrastructure	Tech Hubs	$19 million
Montana-North Dakota partnership**	Accelerate Montana and North Dakota State University	Smart optical sensing (Montana); food security and precision agriculture (North Dakota)	Tech Hubs (Montana); Regional Innovation Engines (North Dakota)	$41 million (Montana); $15 million (North Dakota)
Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minn.	GREATER MSP	Medical technology, biomanufacturing (sustainable aviation fuels, proteins), sustainable plastics, semiconductors	Tech Hubs designation, BBBRC finalist, Regional Innovation Engines development award*	$1.5 million
Madison-Milwaukee, Wis.	BioForward	Personalized medicine	Tech Hubs	$49 million
Buffalo-Rochester-Syracuse, N.Y.	OneROC, CenterState CEO, Buffalo Niagara Partnership	Semiconductors	Tech Hubs	$40 million
New Orleans	Greater New Orleans Foundation	Advanced manufacturing, construction, health care, transportation and logistics	State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds****	$1.6 million
Southern West Virginia	Coalfield Development Corporation (on behalf of the ACT Now Coalition)	Advanced energy, digital economy, land and resource stewardship, advanced manufacturing, place-based redevelopment	BBBRC	$63 million

*Awards are implementation awards unless otherwise noted.

**The Montana Tech Hub and the North Dakota Regional Innovation Engine are two separate federally funded coalitions; they used the Good Jobs Economy PLC to explore and strengthen partnerships between their coalitions.

***GREATER MSP is in a lead role but not backbone for the Regional Innovation Engines coalition.

****While the region did not secure Good Jobs Challenge funding, "the application process generated significant local momentum...for example, highlighted the urgent need for more robust industry engagement in workforce development," as documented in a recent Brookings report.

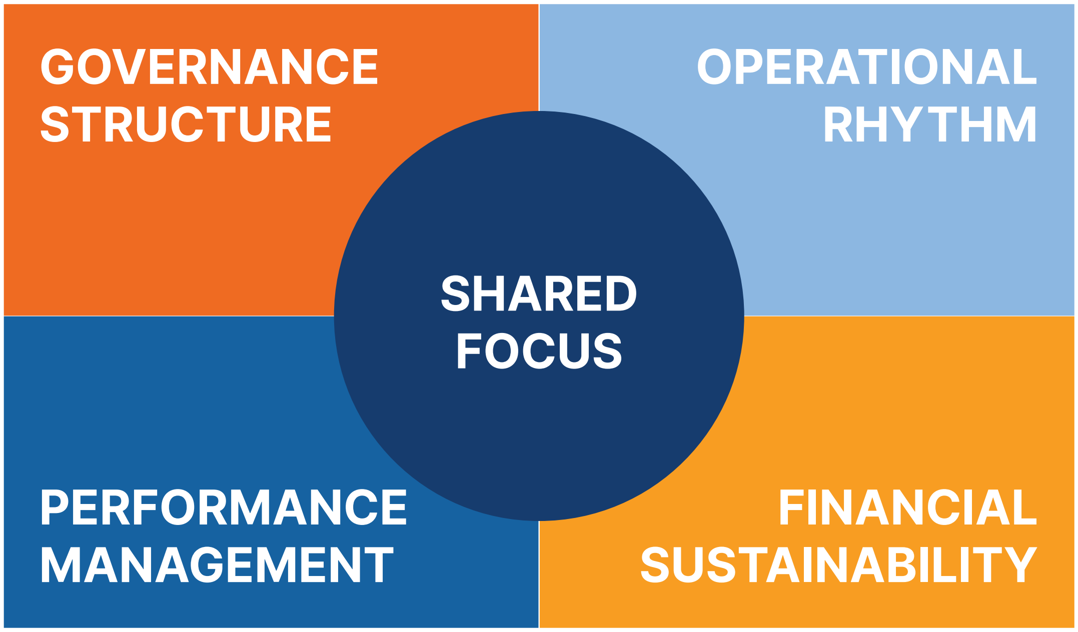
Tour of a construction and trades job center site in South Florida. These cranes are used to build sea walls. With their newly minted tech hub funding, up to 700 new apprenticeships will be created for concrete fabrication. | Photo credit: America Achieves

The five building blocks of effective cross-sector coalitions

Every coalition is unique by necessity, as it must adapt to fit a region's distinct characteristics, including but not limited to its history and culture; its leaders and their relationships, personalities, and power dynamics; and its mix of public, private, and civic institutions. Acknowledging that diversity, our work with leaders in the PLC revealed five important building blocks of an effective coalition: shared focus, governance structure, performance management, operational rhythm, and financial sustainability.

FIGURE 1

Five building blocks of governance for an effective regional coalition



SHARED FOCUS

Coalition-based economic strategies need a shared economic vision as a foundation for the planning, resourcing, and execution of an outcomes-driven strategy. Without a unified vision, efforts can quickly become fragmented, hindering the region's ability to achieve measurable economic and workforce goals. Many regions had existing initiatives and prior attempts at aligning regional assets, often in the face of key change catalysts (such as crises, key leadership transitions, and critical resource gains). However, the recent wave of major federal funding provided modest planning grants and a forcing function—a mandate—for regions to fully align around a shared vision and theory of change, then iteratively develop a clear, shared focus on a strategy and a North Star that could change the trajectory of the regional economy.

A prerequisite step for many regions, then, was to understand the region's starting point. In some regions, leaders—including those from economic development organizations, nonprofits, and other civic organizations—achieved this by conducting a **landscape analysis** of the region's large-scale initiatives aimed at boosting economic opportunity and mobility through workforce, community, and/or economic development. In some cases, this process consisted of a series of informal conversations between these key regional leaders. In others, it was a more formal process that involved: 1) gathering representatives from all relevant organizations and conveners in the region (e.g., for a talent-focused initiative, these might include higher education institutions, workforce intermediaries, training providers, and philanthropic funders); 2) surfacing past and ongoing strategic initiatives, plus lessons from them; and 3) collecting and dissecting rigorous data about the regional economy, in context of recent trends and relative to peer regions.

A landscape analysis may surface complex power dynamics. It may require leaders from the region's key government, industry, and civic organizations to have honest conversations and confront tough choices as they work to define, and especially operationalize, a shared North Star—one informed by data and stakeholder input that serves the region as a whole. As Joy Polefrone, leader of the **Richmond-Petersburg** Tech Hub coalition, said:

> "You're working across different value propositions, trying to find the win-win on multiple levels. One thing I originally underestimated in doing this work was the importance of articulating the 'WIIFM'—the 'what's in it for me'—for each of those individual organizations involved."

Just as important, especially in these early stages, was for regional stakeholders to build a shared foundation of trusted relationships. This doesn't happen overnight—stakeholders build trust through months, years, and decades of hard conversations, following through on commitments, and navigating progressively harder, more complex challenges together. Still, in regions where leaders needed to increase familiarity quickly, one approach was structured **leadership exchanges**. Even within one region, leaders from economic development, higher education, labor, workforce development, government, and other key partners—often spanning multiple counties—rarely have the time or capacity to "zoom out" from their own day-to-day work and understand the broader ecosystem. Site visits and leadership exchanges can offer a structured way for these leaders to learn more about each other's work, strengthen relationships, and better understand the regional strategy as a whole.

Landscape analyses in action: Greater Philadelphia

As stakeholders in **Greater Philadelphia**—spanning parts of New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania—began organizing their regional workforce ecosystem, they launched a landscape scan. Zakiyyah Ali, a coalition leader, noted these key questions: "Who are all the players in this space? What are they doing? Is it effective or not? Do we have all the right people at the table?" The landscape scan identified eight active regional initiatives addressing workforce development, including the region's Good Jobs Challenge award and Tech Hubs designation, led by a handful of economic and workforce development organizations. The analysis revealed a need for better cross-jurisdictional coordination, reinforcing the coalition's commitment to collaborating regionally to bridge employer demand and labor supply across high-growth industries that offer quality jobs, including advanced manufacturing, clean hydrogen, and life sciences.

Leadership exchanges in action: New York

Leaders in **Buffalo** and **Rochester** (later joined by Syracuse) recognized that to become a nationally competitive semiconductor cluster, they would need to overcome historically competitive dynamics between themselves and join forces. Thus, civic leaders decided to bring 35 to 50 leaders from across domains together—first from Buffalo to Rochester, then Rochester to Buffalo—to spend a day seeing and learning about the programs, institutions, and infrastructure in each region. Leaders also used these visits as opportunities to showcase data demonstrating the region's economic integration (e.g., worker commuting data across the regions) and existing models of regional collaboration (e.g., university research partnerships, economic development entities' collaborations on site preparation and development by local borders). "It gave us all an opportunity to more deeply appreciate the assets in our respective markets," said Joe Stefko, president and CEO of OneROC, the Rochester region's economic development alliance, and now lead for the corridor's $40 million Tech Hubs coalition, which complements a $100 billion investment from Micron.

Then, when faced with the potential federal funding opportunities, many regions undertook **industry assessments** to sharpen their focus on a few priority industry sectors. Independent, data-driven assessments of the region's economy—particularly its competitive and emerging clusters, plus their needs, scale, and trajectories—can be particularly useful in focusing the region's resources and strategic efforts on a few priority industries. But industry selection cannot just be a published report; it must be combined with **coordinated internal communications** and stakeholder engagement—such as articulating the above-mentioned "WIIFM"—as well as **strategic external communications** to redefine the region's trajectory and priorities (e.g., as "high-opportunity clusters"), both for the public and for targeted audiences, including prospective firms. All this must also be grounded in a **shared theory of change** (e.g., how the region defines good jobs, plus how to grow them). Only then can the region align its limited resources behind the critical industries where it has the greatest competitive advantages and is likely to achieve the greatest returns and impact.

Industry analyses in action: Central Indiana

Founded in 1999 as the core convener for the region's corporate CEOs, private foundation leaders, and university presidents, the Central Indiana Corporate Partnership (CICP) has structured Indiana's civic ecosystem around the region's four priority clusters, each led by a cluster-specific backbone: agbiosciences (led by AgriNovus), life sciences (BioCrossroads), advanced manufacturing and logistics (Conexus), and technology (TechPoint). These clusters were identified through a series of industry analyses commissioned by the Battelle Technology Partnership Practice (predecessor of TEConomy) beginning in 2000; more recently, a 2018 TEConomy study evolved and refined the clusters to reflect new economic trends and cross-sector disruptive technology developments in the region. In 2016, CICP also launched its cross-sector workforce backbone, Ascend Indiana, with the aim of connecting people directly to careers, building talent pipelines when supply doesn't meet demand, and conducting research to inform policy and practice.

Importantly, this process of defining a shared North Star, theory of change, and strategic priorities is iterative. Through a landscape assessment and trust-building interventions, regional stakeholders can begin developing a shared vision and theory of change for the region, which in turn can set the parameters of an industry assessment. The findings of the industry assessment can then catalyze the launch of a sector-focused initiative or coalition, which can then help refine the vision and adapt it to evolving technological and sociopolitical conditions.

SHARED FOCUS: IN BRIEF

- The recent federal investment moment provided a useful **window of opportunity**—in the form of modest planning grants and important validation of regional strengths through a competitive federal process—that helped regional coalitions to align strategies around a shared focus with a compelling vision and key priorities.
- An initial **landscape analysis** can help surface relevant initiatives, redundancies, and potential synergies.
- **Trust-building** is key, and while it cannot happen overnight, coalitions can use leadership exchanges to build and strengthen relationships.
- Independent, data-driven **industry analyses**—paired with strong internal and external strategic communications and grounded in a shared theory of change—are critical for regions to align focus and limited resources behind a few priority industries where they have the greatest competitive advantage.
- The process of defining and sustaining shared focus is **iterative**: Coalitions must identify a shared vision that provides a guiding North Star for aligning the regional strategy, which in turn can refine the vision, and so on.

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

In this multi-organizational context, governance does not mean board structure and processes. Rather, as introduced earlier, it is the combination of formal rules and informal norms that shape a coalition's way of working, including clearly defined roles and responsibilities. An effective governance structure ensures that a coalition's membership is organized to facilitate coordinated action, enabling the consistent delivery of strategic objectives and measurable impact. PLC regional coalitions vary in structure and industry focus, but generally converge on a few common elements (see Figure 2):

- **Advisory board or steering committee:** A regional table for convening senior, decisionmaking representatives of all key constituencies, typically including key businesses, industry associations, colleges and universities, state and local government, Tribes, nonprofits, and community-based organizations.
- **Coalition backbone:** Dedicated capacity—whether staff at an existing organization or a new independent entity—to oversee, resource, and guide execution of the regional strategy.
- **Members:** Senior, decisionmaking representatives from regional institutions responsible for implementing the shared strategy—typically including representatives from economic development organizations, colleges and universities, workforce training and other service providers, community-based organizations, industry associations, and other institutions—each of whom contributes some combination of expertise, influence, lived experience, "boots-on-the-ground" wisdom, and other resources (see "Coalition success depends on having the right members" sidebar).
- **Working groups:** Subsets of coalition members tasked with advancing a specific strategic mission (e.g., integrating a high-growth industry talent pathway, building a business incubator and accelerator space). Each has a lead responsible for overseeing execution, and who also serves as point person for coordinating with other working groups.
- **Supporting partners:** Regional, state, and federal stakeholders who are not directly responsible for implementing the regional strategy but may offer important advisory perspectives and resources on an as-needed basis (e.g., industry associations, economic development agencies, workforce investment boards, anchor employers, philanthropies, higher education associations, etc.).

BOX 3

Coalition success depends on having the right members

To maximize progress toward the shared North Star, the governance structure must gather the right kinds of representatives from each participating institution. As David Johnson, former lead of the aforementioned Central Indiana Corporate Partnership, noted, “Long-term commitments will be essential, and the specific representatives involved will need to be able to both enable outcomes and have the time and position within their respective organizations to be able to commit resources [financial and human capital investments].” More specifically, coalition members must:

- **Be sufficiently senior** to speak to institutional priorities and needs and have the authority to commit organizational resources.
- **Be appropriately positioned** within the organization to have subject matter expertise (e.g., on talent development, industry trends) and a clear, important reason to participate on behalf of their organization.
- Have autonomy and flexibility to dedicate time in their schedules to continue participating in coalition efforts.

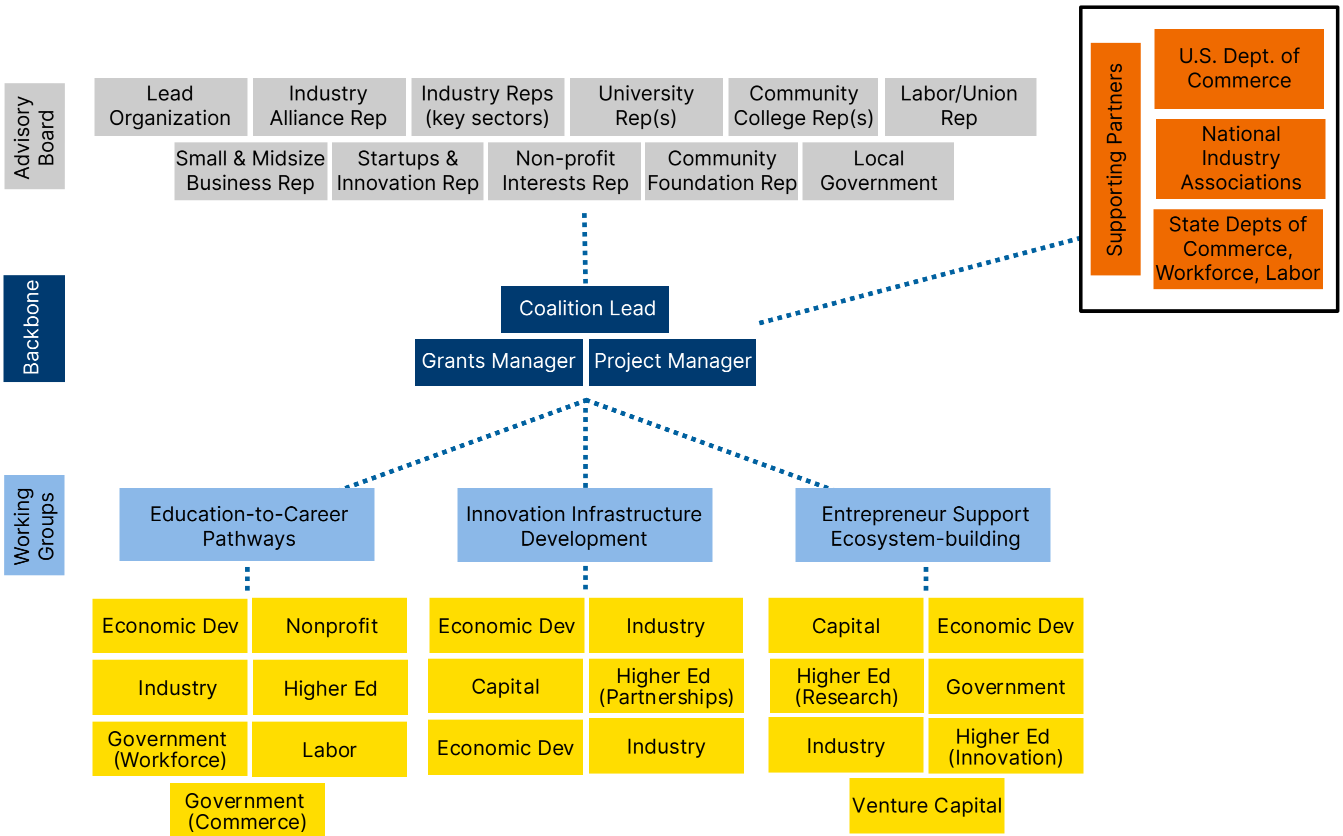
At the same time, coalition membership must extend beyond the “usual suspects” (e.g., major higher education institutions, regional civic and industry organizations) to include a broader group of partners (e.g., community-based organizations, community colleges), who can bring fresh perspectives and resources to drive innovative solutions.

Wisconsin Biohealth Tech Hub’s in-person consortium workshop in Milwaukee in August 2024. | Photo credit: America Achieves

FIGURE 2

A visual representation of a regional cross-sector coalition

Dotted lines illustrate that while there are clear roles and relationships between coalition members, they do not hold formal authority, and instead are connected by shared focus (see Box 4 "Coalition-based economic strategies require a different type of leadership").



SOURCE: Brookings Metro and America Achieves

BOX 4

Coalition-based economic strategies require a different type of leadership

Across the PLC's diverse range of regions, one common theme emerged: the importance of strong, collaborative, and adaptive leadership that seeks out mutually beneficial outcomes. This insight aligns with prior Brookings work and other research pointing to collaborative leadership as a critical ingredient for advancing a successful regional strategy and other systems change.

Notably, leading a coalition-based economic strategy demands a different *type* of leadership than running a single organization. As Joy Polefrone, leader of the **Richmond-Petersburg** Tech Hub, put it:

"The future of these coalitions depends on distributed responsibility and ownership, because you can't have one organization hold it all. And that invites leaders to step into different capabilities than they have historically been rewarded for. **It's a leadership development and acceleration opportunity.** Any leader working in a coalition has to stretch and change, taking on a bigger view and strategy than what they might inherently own."

It is important to note here that "leadership" does not just mean the work of the coalition's formal lead entity or point person. It also includes the day-to-day work of coalition members leading projects, initiatives, and organizations that contribute to the success of the broader strategy. Leadership in this coalition-based context differs from organizational leadership in three ways:

1. **Distributed, not hierarchical.** There is no clear line of command, especially when funding is distributed across both multiple sources and end uses (projects), rather than funneled through one backbone. Leaders must share ownership and responsibility while navigating inherent power imbalances. This lack of clear hierarchy means that effective leaders are naturally collaborative and can be comfortable navigating unstructured environments.

2. **Interdisciplinary and connective, not specialized.** While a leader may benefit from domain expertise, the work ultimately requires bridging between domains across sectors. Thus, a great leader demonstrates bold vision, reaching beyond the scope of what any organization could achieve alone.

3. **Influence- and relationship-based, not based on formal authority.** Even when coalitions use memorandums of understanding or other written agreements, effective execution of the strategy ultimately depends on trust, plus having leaders who are willing to invest time and effort into relationship-building, especially with skeptics, to gradually expand the coalition's reach over time.

As discussed earlier, leadership transitions can pose serious setbacks, especially for nascent coalitions. To institutionalize the collaboration beyond the tenure of any one person, some coalitions are using memorandums of understanding (MOUs). Though not necessarily legally binding, they outline roles and expectations for coalition members, reinforce their shared commitment to the regional strategy and coalition priorities, and provide a reference tool for ensuring continued participation and accountability.

Memorandums of understanding in action: West Virginia

West Virginia's coalition has designed one overarching MOU that articulates five priority sectors and their respective working groups (advanced energy, digital economy, advanced manufacturing, land and resource stewardship, and place-based redevelopment), which were selected as emerging sectors with the potential to diversify the region's historically coal-dependent economy. The MOU also outlines a governance structure (a five-member steering committee plus 21 voting members) that allows for flexibility and evolution while institutionalizing the collaboration. The document codifies the roles, responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms for the coalition and working group leads, voting members, steering committee members, and working group members, as well as norms for decisionmaking—e.g., consensus-based decisionmaking, allowing for formal votes when needed (see Appendix I).

GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE: IN BRIEF

- While specific elements of coalition **governance structure** vary across regions, most consist of an advisory board, a coalition backbone, members, mission-focused working groups, and supporting partners.
- Coalition-based work requires a different type of **leadership**—distributed, interdisciplinary and connective, and influence- and relationship-based—by all members, who should be sufficiently senior institutional representatives to ensure successful execution of the strategy.
- Coalitions can use **memorandums of understanding** to institutionalize collaboration and ensure continuity, especially through leadership transitions.

OPERATIONAL RHYTHM

No matter how clear the aligned focus or how sound the governance structure, the regional coalition cannot be considered effective if it does not deliver on its promised outcomes. Here, coalitions must develop an operational rhythm, or a way of working, that respects busy coalition members but also keeps them engaged at the appropriate level. A coalition's success depends not only on the success of each working group, but also on continued alignment—including collective awareness and information-sharing—across them.

After some experimentation, multiple emerging regional coalitions settled on a **tiered meeting structure**, with different subsets of coalition members meeting on different cadences depending on their roles, to establish operational rhythms in the early stages of project development and implementation (Figure 3). That may look something like:

- **Weekly** meetings between core leads of working groups to share updates, address emerging issues, anticipate challenges, and ensure alignment between projects.
- **Weekly-biweekly** meetings within each working group to monitor progress and share updates (including relevant updates about the other working groups from the working group lead).
- **Monthly** virtual all-hands coalition meetings to share updates and celebrate wins.
- **Quarterly** in-person all-hands coalition meetings to continue building relationships.
- **Quarterly** meetings of the coalition's advisory board.
- **Annual** regional summit that gathers all stakeholders.
- **Ad hoc** updates to all coalition stakeholders via newsletters and other channels.

FIGURE 3

An example of an early-stage coalition's quarter calendar

Approx. # of attendees	Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
3-5	Core leads meetings	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting
5-6	Working group A meetings	Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting	
10-12	Working group B meetings	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting	Meeting
8-10	Working group C meetings		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting		Meeting
40-50	All-coalition meetings	All-hands, virtual				All-hands, virtual				All-hands, virtual		All-hands, in-person	
80+	Stakeholder engagement				Advisory board mtg		Newsletter						Newsletter

SOURCE: Brookings Metro

Although this meeting schedule may be valuable in the early days of a coalition as its members build new collaborative muscles, a coalition will need to adapt and generally decrease meeting frequency over time. As it matures and strengthens trust, it will need to ensure that engagement remains sustainable for these senior leaders in the long term. It may still organize ad hoc meetings as time-sensitive opportunities or crises arise, but the frequency and intensity of interaction during the startup phase of a major strategy likely cannot be sustained given the voluntary participation of many coalition members.

Maintaining an effective operational rhythm requires more than an organized calendar. When working among multiple busy leaders, each juggling many competing priorities, **internal communication** must be intentional to ensure meaningful use of time at each meeting. According to interviews, achieving alignment may involve multiple one-on-one conversations—particularly with skeptics—prior to larger group meetings, to be able to fully talk through different perspectives without the time pressure of making a decision in a large-group meeting. Having a coalition-wide **project management system**, with a skilled project manager, can also be helpful for setting agendas, keeping track of progress, and coordinating stakeholder engagement within each of the above meetings.

Tiered meeting structure in action: West Virginia

West Virginia's coalition operates with weekly meetings between core project leads, a monthly "all-hands" coalition meeting, plus a quarterly coalition-wide meeting in person, according to Brandon Dennison, the lead for the region's BBBRC coalition. "Some of these partnerships existed before," explained Dennison, "but they were more one-off, and so really the most powerful thing is our cadence. [With this cadence,] we build up a partnership muscle by doing projects together, communicating together, and having a regular rhythm." The in-person time and relationships built have even sparked additional projects, such as a new tourism initiative for Southern West Virginia.

OPERATIONAL RHYTHM: IN BRIEF

- The success of a coalition depends not only on each working group delivering on its own goals, but an **operational rhythm** that enhances communication and alignment across workstreams.
- Coalitions can implement **tiered meeting structures**, with meetings happening most frequently within working groups and across their leads, with less frequent but regular coalition-wide interactions.
- Coalitions need strong **internal communications**, including **project management tools** (and, as needed, one-on-one pre-meetings) to manage progress and ongoing stakeholder engagement across workstreams.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

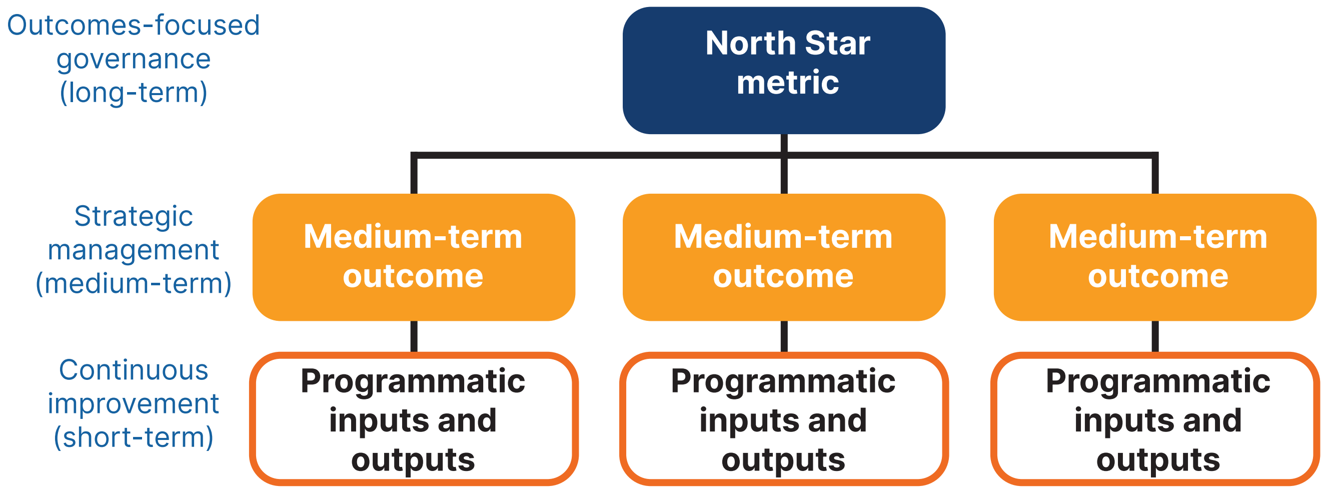
Accountability is key to ensuring effective use of resources and delivering meaningful results for the regional economy. Traditionally, many regions have defined a set of metrics, often grouped by issue area (e.g., housing, employment). While these indicators—especially when paired with a user-friendly dashboard—can help stakeholders generally understand the regional economy, they rarely can help pinpoint gaps and useful interventions to inform action. To maximize outcomes, coalitions can deploy a **tiered metrics framework** that monitors progress at three levels, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5:

- Outcomes-focused governance, using key long-term macroeconomic indicators (e.g., number of workers in good jobs). Coalition leads, funders, and board members can use these to set and refine regional goals and priorities and review progress toward desired outcomes on an annual basis.
- Strategic management, using medium-term outcomes and lagging indicators (e.g., worker placement in good jobs). Coalition leaders and the backbone team can use these to focus resources on the most effective initiatives; implementers can reference them to contextualize their own work in the regional strategy; and coalition leads can leverage these to communicate the coalition's work to broader audiences.
- Continuous improvement, tracked through short-term programmatic inputs and outputs—typically, leading indicators (e.g., workers enrolled in training, number of startups and legacy firms supported). Implementers and coalition leaders can use these to track week-to-week progress and adjust as needed, leveraging what is working and addressing what isn't in short-term cycles.

America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort | Photo credit: America Achieves

FIGURE 4

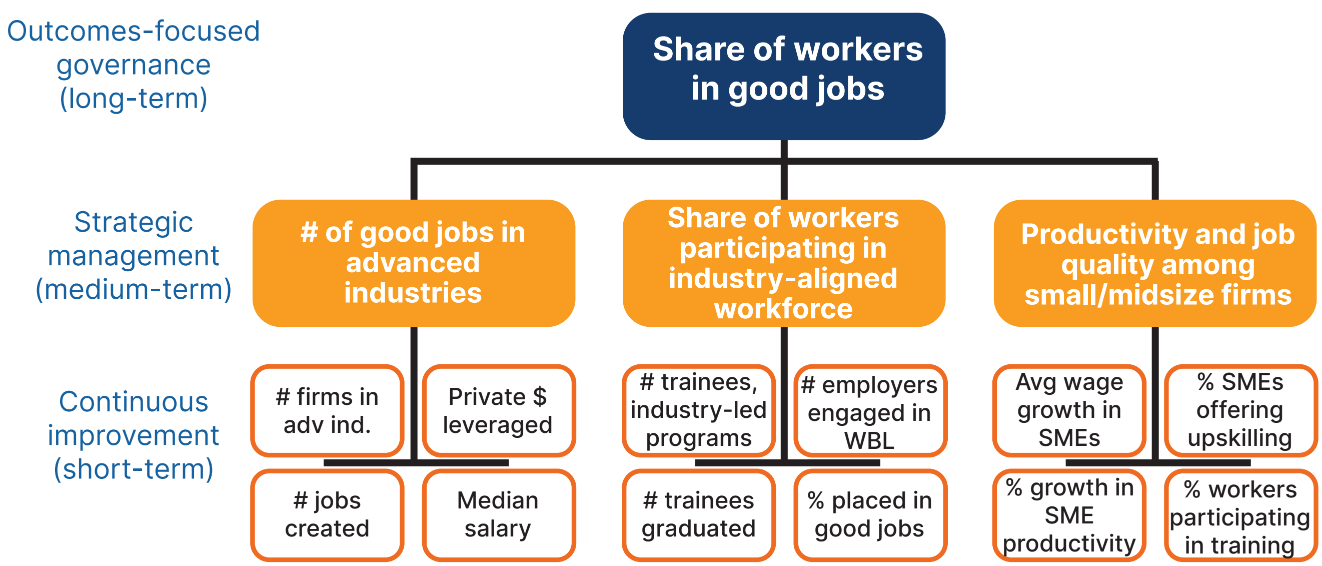
A visual illustration of a tiered metrics framework



SOURCE: Brookings Metro

FIGURE 5

An example of a tiered metrics framework



SOURCE: Brookings Metro

In addition to designing the metrics framework itself to be more action- and outcomes-oriented, two steps are key: 1) coalitions need **user-friendly systems for collecting data**; and 2) they must present those data in an accessible way, such as through a regularly updated **coalition-wide dashboard**. Multiple leaders noted in interviews that the data reporting mandated by federal agencies has been burdensome and compliance-oriented; to improve on these processes, some coalitions have built internal portals and other easy-to-use systems for implementers to seamlessly and regularly report their outcomes. These data feed into the internal coalition-wide dashboard, which in turn helps coalition members understand how their work contributes to the broader regional mission and strategy—and pivot, course correct, or adapt their approach as needed, month to month.

Brandon Dennison, a leader in the **West Virginia** coalition, explained this importance of tracking live progress toward the key project-specific goals and performance indicators the coalition self-defined in its BBBRC application, and then using that information to course correct as needed:

"We have a dashboard that breaks down our eight different projects and the collective impact of the entire coalition, and that's been really helpful for accountability. If there is an issue, like if one project is slightly behind, we put it out there pretty quickly. Sometimes, the cost is that we might feel a little embarrassed at an internal team meeting, but we've also built up a lot of trust and partnership muscle by having a regular rhythm for working and communicating together."

That dashboard must be complemented by strong **storytelling and strategic communications** capabilities to maximize quality, reach, and engagement on both its project-specific and coalition-wide impacts and benefits for the regional economy. This process involves identifying and then tailoring these communications for key audiences. For example:

- For **board members**, coalitions may develop "impact briefs" that synthesize the coalition's progress along key medium- and long-term outcome metrics, paired with stories of firms, workers, and entrepreneurs that have benefited from the coalition's collaboration.
- **Private and public funders** may also appreciate impact briefs, as detailed above, with particular attention to quantitative outcomes and measures of returns on investment.
- The **regional public** may resonate most with simple, clear metrics paired with human stories of workers and entrepreneurs and how they have benefited from the network of resources available through the coalition.

America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort | Photo credit: America Achieves

User-friendly data dashboard in action: Tulsa, Oklahoma

As a leading example, **Tulsa's** Labor Market Observatory (LMO) provides real-time data on the region's workforce trends, including job demand, regional talent shortages, and skills requirements for occupations in fast-evolving, tech-driven industries. The LMO thus enables regional workforce leaders to make adaptive, informed strategic choices that keep their work responsive to evolving talent needs, including in emerging industries. This LMO was developed and is maintained by the George Kaiser Family Foundation's Integrated Strategies team. In addition, as described in this recent Brookings piece, the LMO is complemented by a user-friendly reporting platform for dozens of sub-awardees to input quantitative and qualitative data, as well as a leadership-facing dashboard that tracks both program-level outcomes and macroeconomic indicators to enable data-informed decisionmaking.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: IN BRIEF

- While helpful for building situational awareness, the typical approach to defining a bundle of metrics is not useful for **pinpointing gaps** and informing action.
- Instead, regional coalitions need a **tiered metrics framework** that nests short-term indicators under medium-term strategic outcomes and indicators, all of which ladder up to long-term indicators.
- A regularly updated, user-friendly **dashboard** is an important vehicle for making those metrics actionable, to inform proactive pivots and course corrections.
- The coalition also needs **storytelling and strategic communications** capabilities that can leverage these metrics to demonstrate the coalition's impact to key audiences.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

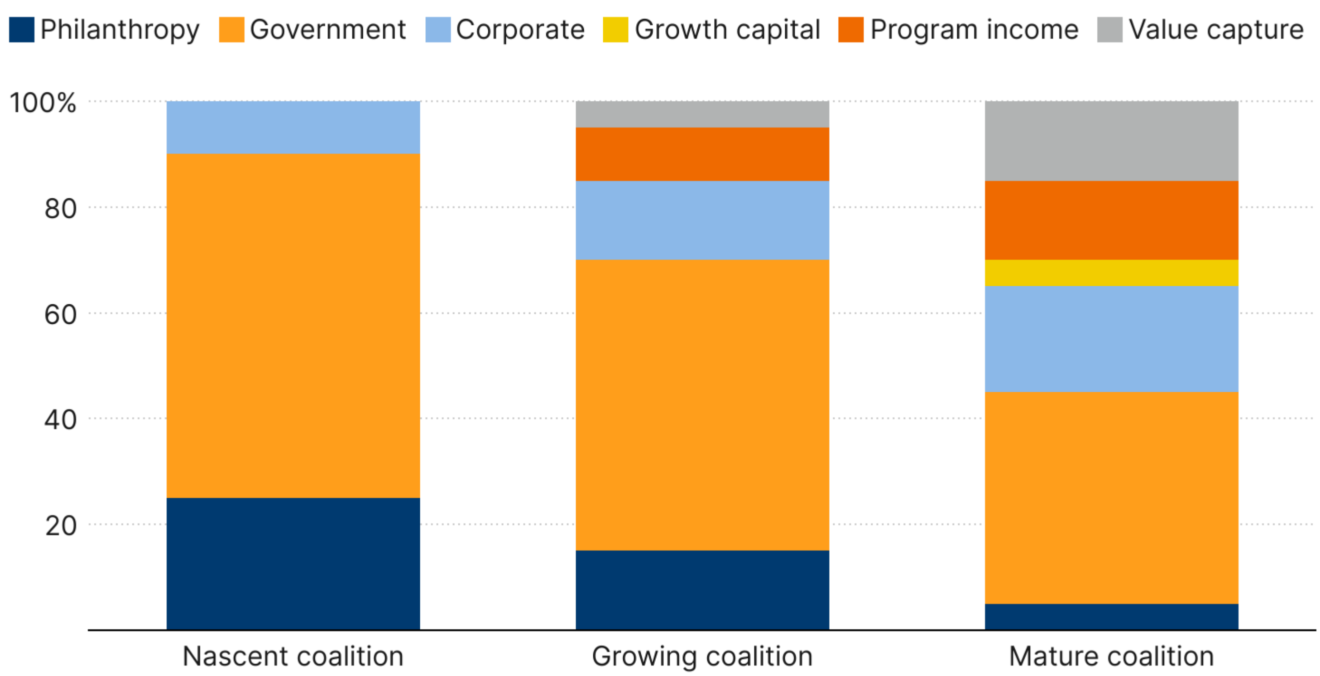
A coalition looking to deliver on ambitious, transformative visions and market-shaping strategies requires significant investment at a scale that cannot rely on one source. Even when a large government grant serves as a catalyst, maximizing the long-term impact of public funding requires new co-investment models that leverage the flexibility of philanthropic resources and the scale and speed of private sector capital to sustain and scale a market-shaping strategy that delivers lasting outcomes.

More concretely, ensuring a sustainable flow of resources for a coalition involves ensuring resources for both its strategic initiatives and the often invisible, underrecognized backbone functions that help ensure continued alignment between them. Altogether, that work requires diversifying its funding sources (Figure 6), from seed capital (typically government or philanthropic grants) to a **multi-source capital stack**, which may include but is not limited to:

- **Philanthropy:** Short-term or multi-year grants, including flexible funding, from endowments and mission-aligned donors, as well as technical assistance and other in-kind support.
- **Government:** Grants (through appropriations), incentives, and contracts.
- **Corporate:** Membership dues (in CEO and business membership organizations, etc.), philanthropic grants, and possible investments in workforce development (from the human resources department) and startup company platforms (from the business development budget).
- **Growth capital:** Investment returns and fund management fees.
- **Program income:** Sponsored research, facilities, training fees, and employer contributions.
- **Value capture:** Monetizing real estate (e.g., innovation districts, tax increment financing [TIF] districts).

FIGURE 6

A coalition's capital stack should evolve over time—an illustrative capital stack



SOURCE: Inspired by graphic produced by America Achieves; numbers are for illustrative purposes only

Diversifying capital stacks in action: St. Louis

As a long-standing example of diverse capital stacks, in 2002, leaders in **St. Louis**, led by the life sciences backbone BioSTL—which was seeded by philanthropic contributions as well as funding from local universities in 2001—founded the Cortex Innovation Community to accelerate innovation in life sciences and biomedicine. Over the following decade, BioSTL gradually built momentum by expanding its startup investment arm, attracting venture capital, and tracking impact along the way. Then, in 2013, local officials created a $167.7 million tax increment financing (TIF) district to subsidize some of the redevelopment of deteriorated properties in the 200-acre area. Between 2014 and 2024, Cortex generated $105.5 million in net new tax revenue for the Greater St. Louis region through real estate development, worker and entrepreneur training, company recruitment, and more. For more than a decade, BioSTL's work has also been funded by anchor partners (e.g., BJC HealthCare, Washington University), a number of local philanthropic foundations, and most recently, a $25 million federal BBBRC grant.

Often underrecognized is the complex task of managing this portfolio of multiple types of resources, whether that work is done by a backbone entity that centrally manages all of the coalition's funds or—more complicated, but common nevertheless—the funding flows from multiple sources, *through* and *to* different (sets of) coalition members. Government grants often involve arduous reporting and compliance requirements, while philanthropic fundraising often involves long-term relationship-building and corporate fundraising, which can require particularly high-touch performance management to deliver outcomes on shorter cycles. Moreover, funders across sectors tend to be accustomed to supporting specific projects with clearly defined outcomes.

Coalitions have found that to be most effective (especially in the shifting technological, economic, and geopolitical environment), they need discretionary funding. This "we trust you" funding often focuses more on underwriting the coalitions and systems a region needs to deliver outcomes in a rapidly changing environment, as opposed to funding specific programmatic outcomes.

In addition to being able to pull funding from multiple sources of capital, coalitions achieve financial sustainability by building the other critical capabilities explored throughout this report:

- **Governance:** Decisionmaking structures and processes that ensure continued alignment and coalition progress, informed by actionable metrics that guide everything from day-to-day implementation to long-term strategy
- **Goals:** Clearly quantified, easily understood, compelling targets (e.g., the number of additional workers placed in good jobs by 2030)—with complementary priorities, strategies, and metrics to track progress and demonstrate accountability.
- **Data:** Real-time, reliable measures of both the region's economic conditions and the coalition's programmatic inputs and outputs can help demonstrate impact.
- **Storytelling:** Being able to articulate the coalition's goals and impact not only through key performance indicators and other quantitative metrics, but also through human stories of workers and families benefitting from the coalition's collaborative work.

All of these capabilities must be iteratively refined as external conditions shift and priorities evolve. As the capital stack of the coalition changes, so may the coalition's project portfolio and backbone entity. For example, over time, the backbone may seed and later spin off initiatives such as innovation districts, sector partnerships, and startup accelerators as they secure other stable sources of funding.

Detroit coalition members, along with America Achieves advisors during a Nov 2024 site visit. | Photo credit: America Achieves

A holistic approach to ensuring strategic sustainability in action: North Carolina

The North Carolina Biotechnology Center (NCBiotech) was founded in 1984 with the mission of growing the development of the life sciences industry in North Carolina. Its longevity as an impactful, well-supported backbone organization—with 40-plus years of sustained funding through state appropriations, grants, and partnerships—rests on a governance structure with widespread buy-in, a strategic plan with clear goals, and a data-driven impact tracking and communications operation that tells the story of the organization's impact in clear, compelling terms.

NCBIOTECH'S STRATEGY FOR STRATEGIC SUSTAINABILITY

Governance

- Forty-member board: Nine ex officio, 12 state-elected, 19 at-large.
- Ex officio includes state and university leaders plus NCBiotech CEO.
- At-large members fill gaps in business, financial, and scientific expertise.

Goals

- Over 100 patent filings and 35 licenses.
- $5 billion in external funding.
- Enable the creation of 10,000 life sciences jobs and support the announcement of 15,000 additional jobs.
- Lead and support targeted collaborative initiatives in pursuit of $500 million in funding and other in-kind resources.
- Procure $150 million to grow the life sciences ecosystem.

Data and storytelling

- Collect and share industry metrics and trends.
- Highlight regional, statewide, and company successes.
- Inform policy and investment decisions with evidence.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: IN BRIEF

- Sustaining a coalition requires resources for **both** directly implementing strategic initiatives and supporting the often invisible, underrecognized work of the backbone.
- Coalitions ensure more sustainable resources by building **multisource capital stacks**, blending and braiding philanthropic, government, and corporate investment with growth capital, program income, and value capture.
- Coalitions need flexible, **discretionary funding** to be able to be responsive and adaptive, especially in the current evolving environment.
- To sustain these funding flows, coalitions need to maintain and leverage effective **governance, goals, data, and storytelling** capabilities.

America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort | Photo credit: America Achieves

Implications for public policy to support regional coalitions

The experiences of these regional coalitions have demonstrated that government funding plays a uniquely critical role in supporting regional economies—a role that no other funding source can fill at scale, whether philanthropic, corporate, venture, or other. Public investment not only advances industry growth, but also strengthens the talent ecosystems, innovation ecosystems, and physical infrastructure that connect people to those emerging opportunities. In particular, government funding has been essential for:

- **Incentivizing long-term strategic alignment,** including alignment with national goals of growing priority industries critical to national and economic security. In recent waves of investments, the federal government *prescribed priorities*, such as certain technology and industry areas (e.g., advanced manufacturing, energy, semiconductors) that helped regional coalitions coalesce their talent, innovation, and placemaking strategies and initiatives around focused industry opportunities. Many of these federal programs also explicitly *named objectives* to grow good jobs and expand access to them, especially for left-behind regions and communities, and called for regional coalitions to define metrics and goals related to these objectives.

These explicit objectives helped steer and align regional coalitions to articulate focused visions and goals, bridging across sectors and institutions operating with different priorities. Some continuities, such as the Trump administration's continued support for the Tech Hubs program for growing industries critical to national security, reinforce this strategic alignment.

- **Investing in strategic convening** to reduce barriers to cross-sector collaboration. In particular, the *two-phase challenge grant design, capacity-building and planning grants, and designated resources for the backbone* organization across the different federal programs have catalyzed cross-sector collaboration in a diverse range of places. These policy design elements—especially when combined with potentially historic levels of funding promised in the recent wave of federal investment—provided a uniquely strong forcing function for a region's stakeholders to show up at one table, together, and develop and execute a coherent approach. In many regions, for example, that included convening the region's major employers and workforce development partners (to align talent demand and supply, respectively), alongside entrepreneurship and infrastructure partners to build a robust, aligned ecosystem for growing good jobs.

  In interviews, regional leaders called this "gluemaking" or "scaffolding"—setting tables for maintaining alignment over time. Like basic scientific research or investment in hard infrastructure (where the federal government also plays a uniquely important role in investing in the long-term common good), this ecosystem-building may not have immediate applications, but provides an important foundation for programmatic impacts. Over 100 regions received capacity-building and strategy development grants through federal place-based economic policies in recent years, but there are still hundreds of communities that require resources for developing investable strategies. Evidence from place-based policies shows that a region can transition from a high-level vision to an investable strategy through $250,000 to $500,000 in planning grants.

- **Funding data and accountability systems** to track regional progress toward stated goals. All the recent federal programs discussed in this report *required regions to define key metrics, indicators, and/or numeric goals*. However, much of that tracking has focused on fulfilling onerous federal reporting and compliance obligations, with minimal timely feedback loops that enable coalitions to adjust implementation based on what's working and what's not. The tracking has also been primarily piecemeal at best—with performance metrics, goals, and outcomes tracked through a different platform and process for each program, often with each region self-identifying their own metrics and goals—with no centralized process or data infrastructure for tracking and aggregating progress across programs and regions.

  In the most effective and actionable instances, however, regional leaders have taken initiative to create outcomes- and performance-based systems, as shown in the example of Tulsa's Labor Market Observatory. An important extension of these early accountability efforts would be for the federal government to build and maintain a national platform that tracks the data, outcomes, and impacts of investments across the country over time. This could facilitate cross-country benchmarking and learning, all linked to macroeconomic indicators of economic growth and opportunity, while prioritizing outcomes-focused performance management over onerous compliance requirements.

- **De-risking private investment.** Regional coalitions have designated federal award funding to a range of projects spanning talent development, infrastructure and placemaking, innovation and entrepreneurship, and more. In each of these domains, federal funding is supporting a mix of initiatives, including pilots (e.g., launching a new employer-informed workforce training program) and construction projects (e.g., building an innovation accelerator space) that may have relatively high upfront costs but are expected to serve industry needs and activate and leverage private investment in the long run. Regions already demonstrate promise, as many federal programs required coalitions to secure *match funding*, which many sourced from state, business, philanthropic, and other sources.

As an example, in **Madison-Milwaukee**, the Wisconsin Biohealth Tech Hub coalition is using its federal funding to establish "proof of concept" for its projects designed to advance personalized medicine. For one initiative, coalition members are building a mobile health screening and diagnostic center, which will offer services ranging from initial testing to diagnosis. The initiative is designed as a for-profit model, with efforts underway to recruit employers to bring this service to their employees, while also ensuring these services can be provided at low or no cost to residents of the region's lower-income areas. Wendy Harris, a former longtime business executive who now serves as lead for the coalition, emphasized the importance of an entrepreneurial mindset since early in the proposal phase: "If you couldn't describe your project in a way that it'd be financially sustainable after federal funding runs out, then you don't really have a project."

- **Conveying credibility** to regional strategies and proponents through a highly competitive federal designation and grant process. Beyond the dollars (if any) awarded, the intensive federal process legitimizes the promise of a regional strategy toward making a national contribution to economic growth and security. Further, it validates the advocacy efforts of regional sponsors and encourages philanthropic, corporate, and other funders to take regional transformation strategies more seriously as genuine opportunities for progress. For example, in the Greater Tulsa region, Tech Hubs and BBBRC awards not only provided substantial funding, but also "validated the region's collective decision to prioritize growing an [advanced aerial mobility] cluster," as Brookings previously documented.

While some philanthropic foundations have also helped incentivize this sort of transformative regional strategic alignment, convening, and accountability, the federal government is uniquely positioned to support this work at scale across the country. But especially amid shifting federal priorities, the work of growing good jobs and connecting workers to opportunity must ultimately happen at the local and regional level, where people live and work. Moreover, regional leaders are increasingly looking to their state governments as potential partners to leverage their priority-setting authority, convening power, and other resources moving forward, in order to create the critical enabling conditions for local leaders to grow competitive, prosperous regional economies.

Group photo from the Wisconsin Biohealth Tech Hub's in-person consortium workshop in Milwaukee in December 2024. | Photo credit: America Achieves

America Achieves' Good Jobs Economy Convening in December 2024 for the peer learning cohort | Photo credit: America Achieves

Conclusion

Growing an economy with a plentiful number of good jobs and equitable access to opportunity is a long-term national project—not something that will be solved by any single grant or policy. Across the country—from the coalfields of West Virginia to the shores of Miami Beach to the mountains of Montana—cross-sector coalitions are recognizing that no single institution can bear the responsibility for building a good-jobs economy, and that institutionalizing that shared outcome requires more durable structures for long-term alignment.

As demonstrated by the federally funded coalitions' commitment to sustaining their work, as well as the decades of cross-sector engagement driving regional economies (both showcased throughout this report), cross-sector coalitions can be a critical foundation for building resilient, opportunity-rich regional economies. Coalitions give leaders the power to do more with less: aligning resources, focusing on long-term goals, and driving inclusive economic growth. By building strong governance, clear operational rhythms, and shared performance measures, coalitions can turn ambitious visions into actionable, investable strategies that expand opportunity and grow good jobs for all.

Yet despite their power and potential, cross-sector coalitions often fade in the absence of adequate incentives and resources. Here, policymakers and funders also have a crucial role to play. Strategic support—financial, technical, and convening—can unlock these coalitions' full potential and help regions sustain momentum, scale innovation, and respond flexibly to seize future opportunities and weather inevitable future shocks.

The actionable, real-world insights from implementers gathered in this guidebook can inform a diverse range of audiences. It can help regional leaders build and strengthen cross-sector coalitions at any step of the journey. For policymakers and funders, these insights reveal the range of supports that regional coalitions need to deliver meaningful economic growth and opportunity. Together, by investing in collaboration, nurturing civic trust, and centering long-term economic mobility, we can ensure that all communities share in the nation's prosperity.

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APPENDIX

The appendix comes from **West Virginia coalition's MOU** and can be found here:

Appendix I: West Virginia coalition's MOU


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