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COMMUNITY ECONOMICS

Applying the IRED Framework: Case Studies in Inclusive Regional Economic Development

Syracuse, New York

Bienestar Community Economics

The **Inclusive Regional Economic Development** (IRED) framework provides a way to organize strategies, programs, and activities designed to grow inclusive regional economies across **human capital, economic, and placed-based** development approaches. It emphasizes **solution-set approaches** to address the complex and interconnected challenges and opportunities within functional regional economies. This section applies that framework to a series of case studies of regions that have actively pursued inclusive regional economic growth and development. It highlights what these solution-set approaches look like in practice, what capacities are needed to design and implement asset-based strategies and programs, what partnerships look like across systems and jurisdictions, and how leaders have navigated this work and secured the needed capital to resource their shared work.

About CenterState CEO

CenterState CEO is an independent nonprofit committed to creating inclusive, equitable and sustainable economic growth in Central New York. Their team of experts helps their members, clients, and businesses of all sizes start, scale, recruit and relocate. At their core, they are problem solvers working with their partners in public, private, and nonprofit sectors to find collaborative and innovative solutions to advance the region and its people. They hold an unwavering commitment to creating a region where business thrives and all people prosper. As such, they strive to support a more inclusive business community.

Timeline of Milestones

2010	CenterState CEO is formed through a merger of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and the Metropolitan Development Association.
2012	CenterState CEO partners with Brookings Metro to create a Metropolitan Business Plan that includes a focus area of building innovative technology clusters.
2015	Region wins \$500 million from the Upstate Revitalization Initiative (URI); CenterState CEO plays a central role in the application; economic inclusion identified as priority.
2016	Northside Urban Partnership became a part of CenterState CEO's Economic Inclusion portfolio—expanding its neighborhood revitalization work into a broader inclusion strategy.
2017	New political leadership in the region leads to a growing awareness of racial inequity in the business community; Awarded JPMorgan Chase's \$3 million AdvancingCities grant, catalyzing new cross-sector energy around equity and inclusion.
2018	Mayor Ben Walsh launches Syracuse Surge strategy after coming into office.
2019	Syracuse becomes one of Microsoft's Smart City Technology Hubs.
2020	CenterState CEO and Work Train create a Technology Industry Leadership Table to coordinate employer needs and workforce development; ERIE21 workforce development initiative at Le Moyne College receives \$3.2M.
2021	Launches DEI resources and training; workforce training programs launched with Onondaga Community College and others.
2022	CenterState CEO implements inclusive procurement and Surge-related accelerator programs.
2024	The NY SMART I-Corridor receives \$40 million in federal funding to grow the semiconductor industry across Upstate NY; CenterState CEO recognized nationally for aligning inclusive economic development and industry strategy.

The Challenge Being Addressed

In the early 2010s, Central New York faced limited economic opportunity. The region was grappling with slow job and wage growth, rising income inequality, economic segregation, and persistent poverty. A prevailing scarcity mindset among regional leaders hindered collaboration and innovation.

The Approach

CenterState CEO was formed in 2010 through the merger of the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce and the Metropolitan Development Association, positioning itself as a convenor and strategist for economic opportunity and workforce development. While its early focus was primarily on job creation, a shift began in response to both leadership changes and a 2015 research study that highlighted Syracuse as having the highest rates of concentrated poverty among Black and Hispanic residents in the nation. These catalysts prompted the organization to intentionally pivot toward broad economic inclusion and rewrite the region's economic narrative.

IRED Strategies

Although business-led, CenterState CEO functions as a key convenor, bringing together the business community, anchor institutions, community-based organizations, and funders to advance inclusive regional economic development. Their economic growth strategy is anchored in the tenets of Syracuse Surge, a city-led initiative launched in 2019 that positions Syracuse as a hub for the innovation economy, particularly in smart city technology, advanced manufacturing, and digital infrastructure. CenterState CEO plays a central role in aligning public and private investment around these priorities. Their portfolio of programs spans all four pillars of the IRED framework, supported by specific strategies across land use, sectoral alignment, and inclusive business development.

"When talking with the business community, you have to lead with the economic case. If we're going to do place-based work, we need to listen to community-based organizations and neighborhood groups without getting defensive. Looking at workforce systems, we have to help trainers shift their mindset to develop programs that align with real opportunities. We need to operate in the middle ground and focus on building trust."

-Andrew Fish, Senior Vice President of Member and Business Experience,
CenterState CEO

Place-Based Development: Through its community investment programming, CenterState CEO uses land use and corridor revitalization strategies to lead neighborhood transformation—supporting mixed-use real estate development, reactivating vacant lots as community spaces, and strengthening local businesses in historically disinvested areas.

Human Capital Development: As a workforce intermediary, Work Train applies a sector-based approach to develop career pathways in healthcare, construction, and tech. It facilitates employer-led partnerships and training aligned with regional labor market demand.

Business & Economic Development: Through the INSPYRE Innovation Hub, formerly The Tech Garden, CenterState CEO supports the region's innovation ecosystem. It targets resources to startups through grant programs, competitions, and scaling services, while aligning entrepreneurship development with broader innovation and infrastructure goals.

Equity & Inclusion: CenterState CEO embeds equity across its portfolio through its Racial Equity and Social Impact (RESI) division, which delivers DEI training, supports organizational change across regional employers, and advances inclusive procurement and hiring practices as part of a broader inclusive business development strategy.

Conditions for Success

Clear Goals: CenterState CEO leads with a clear and consistent economic development agenda that emphasizes the business and economic rationale for inclusive growth. This framing has allowed the organization to engage the private sector in conversations about equity by aligning inclusion with long-term business competitiveness, workforce sustainability, and regional prosperity. By rooting its messaging in economic logic, CenterState CEO has maintained credibility with business leaders while advancing a broader equity agenda.

Investment Readiness: CenterState CEO leverages its role as a regional convener, fostering cross-sector partnerships across each initiative and facilitating dialogue—even through moments of tension—to align stakeholders around a diverse set of strategies. Their strong convening and collaboration capacity is a key driver of their investment readiness.

For example, in 2024, their NY SMART I-Corridor initiative was awarded \$40 million in federal funding to support the growth of the semiconductor industry across Upstate New York. Through efforts to build adjacent supply chains, attract investment in key sectors, and cultivate robust cross-sector partnerships, CenterState CEO has played a pivotal role in

developing the region's innovation ecosystem—positioning the region as a competitive hub for a range of strategic investments.

Defined equity targets: As discussed, equity is embedded across their portfolio through community representation on the board and the work of the Racial Equity and Social Impact (RESI), which makes the business case for racial equity and integrates inclusive practices internally and externally. By holding a prominent platform among the business community, they are able to influence business leaders collectively—creating momentum and accountability in a way that would not be possible through one-off engagement.

Programs Aligned with the Inclusive Regional Economic Development Pillars



Place-Based Development

- Community investment programming
- Development of mixed-use real estate, affordable housing, and community spaces from vacant lots

Inclusion & Equity

- Community organizations and individuals represented on the board
- Equity lens focusing in areas of concentrated poverty

Human Capital Development

- Technology workforce training
- Syracuse Build: construction workforce training
- Work Train: workforce development intermediary addresses workforce challenges in various sectors
- ON-RAMP: One Network for Regional Advanced Manufacturing Projects

Economic Development

- Development of technology industry clusters
- CenterState Up Start
- Inclusive procurement program

Learn more:

- CenterState CEO | <https://centerstateceo.com/>
- Institutionalizing Inclusive Growth: Rewiring Systems to Rebuild Local Economies - Syracuse, NY, Brookings Metro, 2022 | https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Syracuse_case-study.pdf