

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

Akron, Ohio

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 to highlight 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 Elevate Greater Akron

Elevate Greater Akron is a regional economic development collaborative for the greater Akron, Ohio region. They were founded in 2018 with the goal of advancing economic opportunity and growth for all residents by developing a shared vision and priorities.

While the city of Akron has an estimated population of 188,701, Elevate Greater Akron serves the broader region—spanning Summit and Portage counties, which together total an estimated 702,209 residents as of 2024.

2014–2017	Leadership transitions across key institutions created an opening for regional strategy development.
Mid-2017	New leaders from the city, county, chamber, and philanthropy convened to explore a unified economic development approach.
2017–2018	Collaborative development of a new, inclusive regional economic development strategy.
2018	Elevate Greater Akron officially launched as a shared strategy among core regional actors.
2019	Released the Economic Case for Inclusion Report .
2020	Coordinated a robust COVID-19 response; \$14.3 million in small business relief grants distributed.
2021	Launched the Polymer Industry Cluster initiative.
2022	Secured \$2 million from the EDA to expand the Bounce Innovation Hub Generator.
2023	Designated by the EDA as a Sustainable Polymers Tech Hub.
2024	Awarded \$51 million by the EDA to serve as the nation's Sustainable Polymer Tech Hub.
2024	Announced four shared priorities for the region—becoming the Global Polymer Capital; prioritizing inclusive economic growth through Opportunity Akron, building a thriving downtown through Strong Downtown, Strong Region, and investing in The New Fundamentals approach.
2025	Receives \$6.5 million in local and federal funding to advance workforce development in manufacturing and polymers.

The Challenge Being Addressed

The Elevate Greater Akron initiative emerged in response to fragmented economic development efforts and a stagnating economy. Driven by local philanthropy, government leaders, chambers, and economic development organizations, the region came together around the vision of building a high-functioning, collaborative economic development system that leverages the people, assets, and institutions across Greater Akron.

The Approach

A major catalyst for Elevate Greater Akron was a wave of regional leadership changes. Within a few years, the region welcomed a new mayor, county executive, and chamber president—all of whom shared a belief in the importance of a collaborative regional system to drive economic growth. United by this vision, the County of Summit, City of Akron, Greater Akron Chamber and GAR Foundation came together to launch the Elevate Greater Akron collaborative. Rather than forming a standalone organization, Elevate functions as a network of multi-jurisdictional partners. The collaborative now includes nearly 20 organizations.

As early collaboration proved successful, the group engaged outside consultants to conduct a market assessment, providing the data needed to define a shared set of priorities. These initial focus areas included BRE, innovation and entrepreneurship, downtown revitalization, inclusion, and overall alignment within the collaborative. The collaborative operated without dedicated staff for several years, but in 2024, they hired a full-time Vice President to manage its activities and ensure continued progress. From the beginning, the GAR Foundation played a critical role in supporting and sustaining Elevate's collaborative approach.

IRED Strategies

At the end of 2024, Elevate Greater Akron identified four priorities to advance economic growth and opportunity in the region. These include: advancing the region as a *Global Polymer Capital*; promoting economic inclusion through *Opportunity Akron*; strengthening the urban core with the *Strong Downtown, Strong Region* initiative; and leveraging resources and coordinating efforts to grow existing businesses through *The New Fundamentals* focus. Each of these priorities aligns with the pillars of Inclusive Regional Economic Development (IRED).

**“Leaders got together and asked, ‘What can we do to do better as a region?’
From that Elevate Greater Akron was born.”
- Emily Lundgard, Elevate Greater Akron**

Place-Based Development: Elevate Greater Akron believes that for the entire region to thrive, it must have a strong and vibrant urban core. Through its *Strong Downtown, Strong Region* priority, the initiative focuses on accelerating development, repurposing vacant commercial spaces, increasing residential density, boosting retail activity, attracting new businesses, and strengthening the city's sense of place.

Human Capital Development: Through *Opportunity Akron*, the region is implementing a targeted strategy to expand workforce training opportunities in in-demand sectors, with a specific focus on supporting Black residents in accessing quality career pathways.

Business & Economic Development: Leveraging its longstanding history in polymers and the region's existing assets, the collaborative is positioning itself as the *Global Polymer Capital* by investing in R&D, building talent pipelines, and pursuing resources to drive innovation. The focus on polymers accompanies Elevate's *New Fundamentals* approach, which emphasizes leveraging existing assets to drive sustainable economic growth.

Equity & Inclusion: In addition to *Opportunity Akron*, Elevate Greater Akron has advanced a range of equity and inclusion initiatives aimed at expanding access to quality jobs and economic opportunity. The region conducted a racial equity study that informed an Inclusion Narrative highlighting systemic inequities to guide future efforts.

Conditions for Success

Clear Goals: Elevate Greater Akron embraces what it calls the New Fundamentals of economic development—building networks and systems of collaboration to make it easier to do business by focusing on the region's existing people, assets, and businesses. Grounded in this approach, the initiative is able to prioritize efforts that align with these core principles.

Investment Readiness: Elevate Greater Akron has established a strong foundation that enables it to attract and leverage diversified funding. Its collaborative structure—anchored by a steering committee and working groups—brings together the right stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue, build trust, and create the infrastructure needed for effective decision-making. This coordinated approach has enhanced the region's capacity to pursue bold initiatives and access significant funding opportunities. One notable example is Elevate's investment in the region's polymer industry cluster. Over several years, the collaborative cultivated an ecosystem of industry leaders, economic development

organizations, educational institutions, workforce partners, and public agencies to drive innovation and growth in this sector. In 2024, these efforts culminated in a \$51 million federal award through the EDA Tech Hubs Phase 2 program, affirming the region's readiness for transformative investment.

Defined equity targets: While equity and inclusion are embedded across all of Elevate Greater Akron's priorities, *Opportunity Akron* recognizes that true regional prosperity requires intentional support for historically under-resourced communities—particularly by expanding economic opportunity for Black residents. Their approach takes a holistic view of what they call the *social determinants of work*, acknowledging that access to high-quality employment is closely tied to critical factors such as childcare, housing, and transportation.

Programs Aligned with the Inclusive Regional Economic Development Pillars



Place-Based Development

- Downtown Akron Development Corporation: Accelerating progress on downtown development projects
- Great Streets Initiative: Real estate investments for key Main Street business districts
- Development of a Jobs Hub, an area with concentrated economic activity to create quality jobs in dense residential areas

Economic Development

- Polymer Industry Advisory Council leading development of the polymer industry cluster
- Bounce Innovation Hub: An entrepreneurship hub that serves neighborhood businesses, software startups, and small manufacturing businesses
- SPARK Akron: Entrepreneurial provider ecosystem and Business Retention and Expansion coordination across the ecosystem

Human Capital Development

- Opportunity Akron: An inclusive growth initiative
- ConxusNEO: Workforce development through partnership

Inclusion & Equity

- Job Hub development to make quality jobs more accessible
- Racial equity study that informed an Inclusion Narrative of the racial inequities within the region

Learn more:

- Elevate Greater Akron | <https://elevategreaterakron.org/>
- Institutionalizing Inclusive Growth: Rewiring Systems to Rebuild Local Economies - Akron, Ohio, Brookings Metro, 2022 | https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Akron_case-study.pdf
- Tech Hubs Award Announcement | <https://www.eda.gov/news/press-release/2024/07/02/iFAB-Tech-Hub>