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Measuring Outcomes and Regional Transformation of the Build Back Better Regional Challenge

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INTRODUCTION

During and at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers in the United States renewed their interest and focused on regional place-based development policies. One of these programs was called the Build Back Better Regional Challenge, or BBBRC for short. The federal agency that continues to be most engaged in regional development is the Economic Development Administration, or EDA, created via legislation back in 1965. EDA was also the federal agency responsible for implementing the BBBRC program.

In September of 2022, EDA awarded $1 billion to 21 coalitions across the country[1]. These coalitions focused on a range of industries, ranging from life sciences to semiconductors to farms to artificial intelligence manufacturing. The objective was to "supercharge" local economies through complementary and integrated projects. This program is another example of what regional developers and policymakers call "place-based" policies. These initiatives target a geography with specific characteristics to transform it in the long run rather than investing in infrastructure or human capital, also known as sectoral or project-based development, which are short-term or time-limited.

Given the significant investment in this program, the EDA requested proposals to document its outcomes, lessons learned, and best practices. The Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) was selected, along with the Brookings Institution, the University of Michigan Economic Growth Institute, and the Research Triangle Institute, to conduct this important work.

PCRD's proposal and role were to design and implement a mixed-method, multi-layer outcome evaluation framework. This Research and Policy Insight (RPI) document details the work conducted by PCRD, EDA, and the coalitions. Findings are discussed across multiple sections and topics, providing a robust and holistic understanding of the outcomes and evolution of the BBBRC program, helping inform future regional place-based initiatives.

[1] $1B Build Back Better Regional Challenge | U.S. Economic Development Administration

The background section discusses briefly the history of place-based initiatives in the United States and key themes from the regional development literature to help contextualize the findings of this report. The quarterly survey results section provides aggregated survey data captured over ten quarters as reported by the coalitions. The Ripple Effect Mapping section provides additional BBBRC results that complement the survey outputs documenting unanticipated "ripples" as coalitions implemented the BBBRC.

Next, the Regional Governance section discusses how these coalitions were set up and their evolution during which data was gathered. The Industrial Cluster and CEDS Alignment section discusses the overlap of the coalition work with existing CEDS, as well as any preliminary outcomes on existing industrial clusters. Lastly, the concluding section discusses lessons learned and best practices centered around the BBBRC and its regional outcomes.

BACKGROUND

Regional development literature goes back decades and is as broad as the history of place-based interventions in the United States. It is beyond the scope of this research and policy insight to conduct a detailed review of the regional development literature or the history of place-based interventions in the United States. However, specific themes were identified and discussed to better frame the work done by the Purdue Center for Regional Development (PCRD) when documenting the outcomes of the BBBRC.

Scholars of regional development have come up with multiple theories over the years to better understand regional economic growth. These theories range from focusing on the export base (regions grow due to responses to demands from outside the region) to exogenous factors affecting growth (changes in population, savings rates, development of technology) to industrial restructuring (change from manufacturing to service industries, for example) to growth machine (the influence of powerful local groups) to new economic geography (better understanding the forces that lead to industrial clusters), to name a few (Dawkins, 2003).

Place-based programs or investments have been in place since at least the 1950s, with an initial focus on urban renewal. Since then, the mechanisms to deliver these funds have ranged from block grants to competitive grants to tax credits. A study identified over $456 billion in place-based investments between 1990 and 2019, amounting to roughly $1,633 per person (Tach, Parker, Cooperstock, & Dodini, 2025).

Starting in the 2010s, place-based policies focused on augmenting existing industrial clusters and/or innovation ecosystems. These augmented ecosystems better integrate projects and more efficiently connect universities, businesses, government, start-ups and investors. The assumption

[1] Knowledge Economy, Office of the University Economist, Arizona State University, https://economist.asu.edu/p3-productivity-prosperity-project/knowledge-economy.

is that this in turn will have a larger, more inclusive outcomes on regions. The Build Back Better Regional Challenge (BBBRC) as well as Tech Hubs and the National Science Foundation Engines are examples of these place-based programs. Regardless of program, the literature finds that engaged stakeholders, a systems-level focus, and strategies are key for these to be successful and sustainable (Guzman, Murray, Stern, & Williams, 2024).

PCRD proposed a mixed method, multi-layered approach to document the outcomes of the BBBRC program and obtain valuable lessons learned and best practices. The multi-layer approach entailed gathering data at different "levels". These levels ranged from survey data (most granular) to focus groups to macroeconomic indicators (less granular). This way, PCRD was able to holistically cross-check the outcomes of the program. Mixed methods entailed gathering both quantitative and qualitative data.

QUARTERLY SURVEYS

A quarterly survey was designed, tested, implemented, and analyzed in partnership with EDA. This survey—designed primarily to gather innovation activity and outputs—gathered data from coalitions around the following themes, which aligned with the program's focus areas: accelerating innovation in emerging technologies, help workers access new job opportunities and training, increase new business growth and entrepreneurial activity, building critically enabling infrastructure, help businesses adopt new technologies and enter new markets, and sustain regional governance.

Supporting materials were developed and multiple virtual sessions were conducted with coalitions regarding the survey. These materials explained survey data assumptions or definitions. For example, a custom tool using Census Bureau data was developed to help coalitions identify rural areas in their regions. Likewise, a repository containing supporting materials and tools was created and shared with the coalitions.

The survey data was validated through the following steps: 1) once surveys were completed, the PCRD team reviewed the data and any outliers in the data, such as large numbers with no previous increasing trends, were flagged; 2) an online search was conducted to document public announcements regarding these "large" numbers; 3) PCRD staff reviewed open-ended questions of the survey to get more context; 4) PCRD staff reached out to the coalitions asking for more information and/or supporting materials regarding these data points. Particular attention was placed on Investment and job data points to avoid double counting in the future. Many times, these large data points referred to earmarked or announced projects, not actual spending.

Data gathering began in April 2023 for the previous three months and continued on a quarterly basis ending with the 2025 Q2 period (April-June), resulting in a total of ten quarters. Coalitions were given 2-3 weeks each quarter to complete the survey. PCRD also helped coalitions aggregate data from multiple projects prior to submitting the quarterly survey.

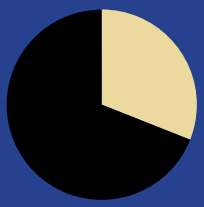
When aggregating data from all coalitions during these ten quarters, the program leveraged an additional $4.3 billion from private, public, and research and development earmarked, announced or spent. Most leveraged funds came from the private sector (68.5 percent). Through its activities, the BBBRC program created 3,388 jobs and 548 businesses while retaining an additional 4,578 jobs. Regarding workforce development, BBBRC efforts placed more than 6,600 residents in jobs after completing training.

BBBRC efforts also resulted in 437 businesses investing or adopting in new technology and more than 2,350 utilizing accelerators and testbeds. Coalitions engaged with a variety of businesses, more than 26,000—of which more than one-third were self-employed or had less than 20 employees. A total of 69 facilities were built or renovated/upgraded, including 12 business/industrial parks, of which 9 were in rural communities. Lastly, more than 900 businesses reported expanding their markets thanks to BBBRC-related interventions, of which almost half were minority owned.

Figure 1 shows the number of coalitions (total of 21) engaging with partners by type for each of the quarters. Research universities, businesses, local/regional government, and nonprofits among the most engaged with. Regardless of the quarter or stage of the project, the average number of partners engaged with ranged from 7 to 9.5 (not shown). This would also explain why coalitions reported consistently that the size of their coalitions stayed the same or expanded in each quarter (not shown).

Leveraged across 10 quarters

$4,300,000,000



private sector contribution

68.5%

other contributions

31.5%

Jobs created

3,388

New businesses

548

Jobs retained

4,578

Trained residents secured jobs

6,600+

Businesses invested in or adopted new tech

437

Businesses engaged

26,000+

Utilized accelerators/testbeds

2,350+

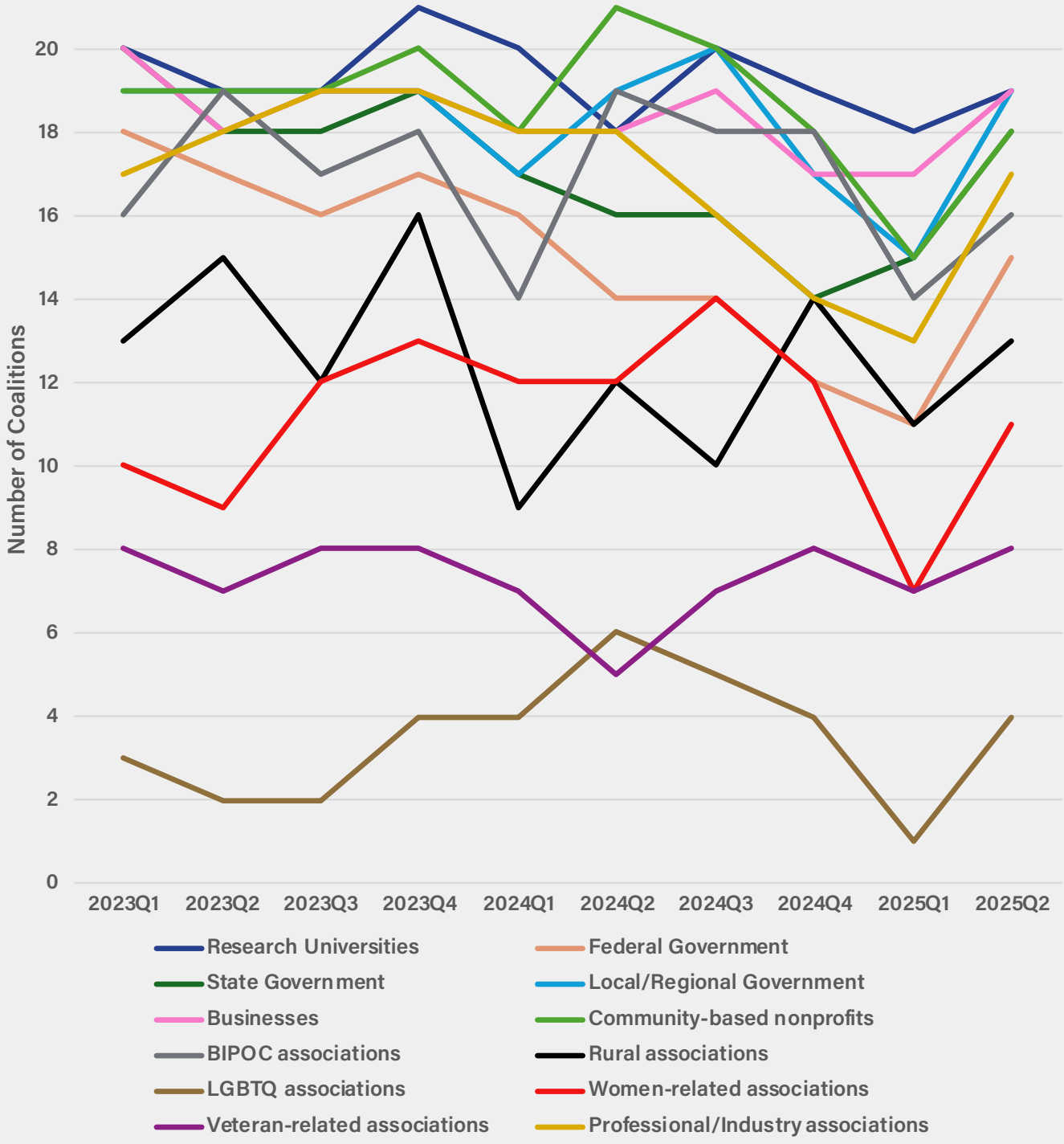
Facilities built/renovated

69

Business market expansion

900+

FIGURE 1. Number of BBBRC Coalitions Engaging with Partners by Type



RIPPLE EFFECT MAPPING (REM) FOCUS GROUPS

The next layer of data gathering consisted of focus groups with coalitions following the Ripple Effect Mapping methodology. This methodology is an appreciative inquiry technique that reveals data, insights, and stories of unanticipated outcomes or ripples from the work of the coalitions that may or may not have been captured by the survey. These focus groups were designed with three guiding questions: benefits of the work conducted, core activities that took place, and catalytic activities that resulted from these benefits or core activities. Catalytic activities are defined as unexpected programs/projects that occurred due to these activities. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the data and document findings. A total of two REM rounds were completed with the coalitions.

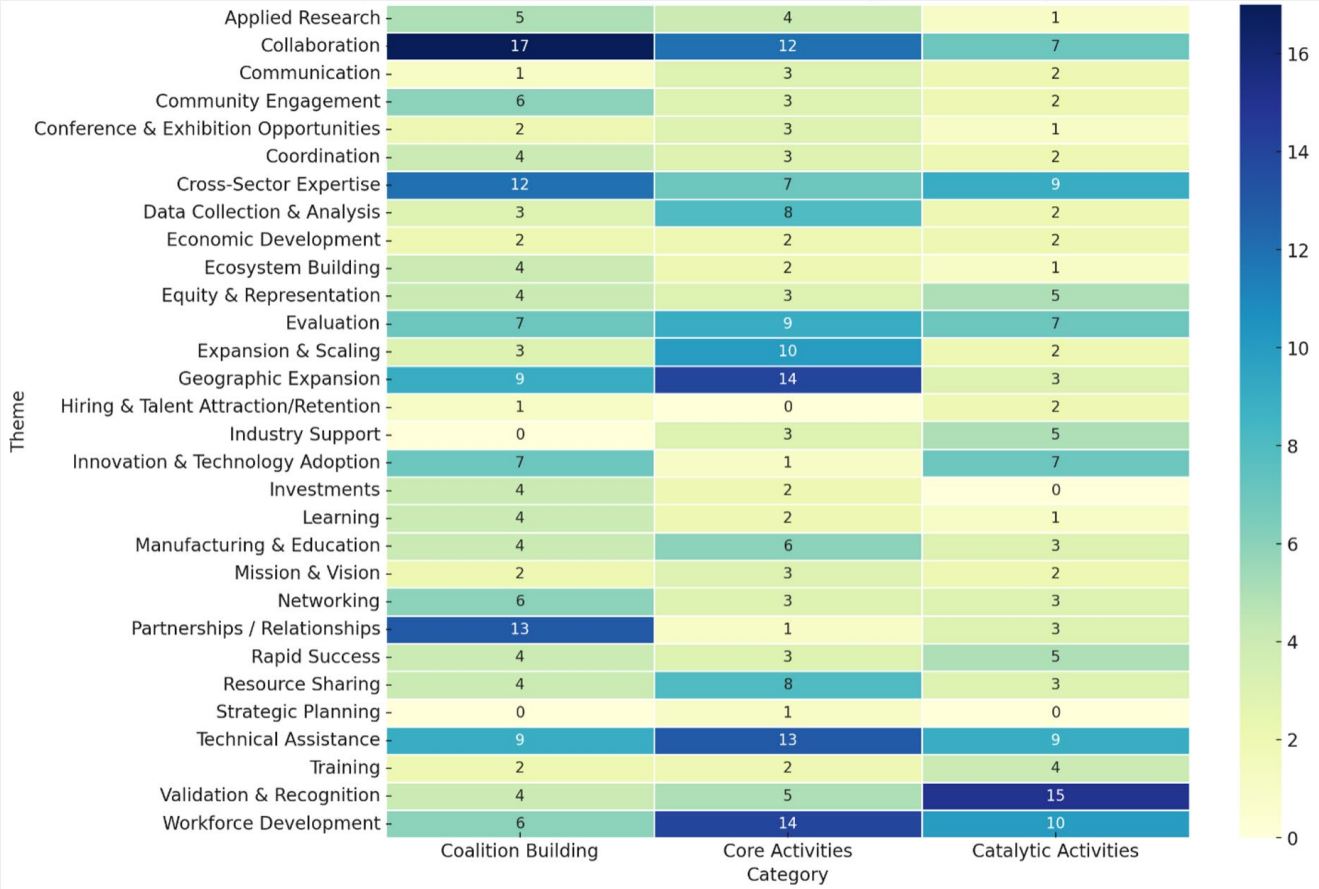
The first round was mostly completed with one-on-one virtual sessions with the coalitions during the first year of the project. Seventeen coalitions participated in these sessions while the remaining four submitted written responses. A total of 189 stakeholders participated in the virtual sessions. While the written mechanism was not ideal, scheduling proved to be a significant challenge. Given that the coalitions were just getting started, the interest was on how they were "setting up shop" through the lens of benefits, core, and catalytic activities.

The second round of REM sessions took place during the second and third year. For this round, all interactions took place via written responses to the guiding questions. This strategy was pursued given the lessons learned during the first round, namely that scheduling was a significant issue. In addition, coalitions at this point were well into the implementation of their projects and since they already had been exposed to the process, PCRD felt it was more efficient to conduct the second REM round with written responses. All 21 coalitions responded to the REM guiding questions. Thematic analysis was also utilized to identify patterns in the data and document findings. This second round, however, focused more on the evolution of the coalitions and their work as their projects were implemented.

Figure 2 shows a heatmap of the most frequent themes identified during the first round of REM sessions. Overall, the heatmap illustrates a strategic alignment among coalitions, where frequently highlighted themes represented core priorities, and others reflected specialized focus areas. This demonstrates a comprehensive approach—strengthening the BBBRC network while capitalizing on low hanging fruit opportunities to generate momentum—helping with long-term sustainability and outcomes.

Key themes like collaboration, workforce development, and partnerships/relationships are consistently emphasized across all benefits, core, and catalytic activities, underscoring their foundational role in coalition strategies to build strong networks, develop essential skills, and foster sustainable relationships. This consistency suggests these themes are central to both broad-based and targeted efforts within the coalitions.

FIGURE 2. Heatmap of Theme Frequencies Across Coalition Building, Core Activities, and Catalytic Activities



In contrast, themes such as technical assistance and innovation & technology adoption are more prominent in the Core and Catalytic Activities categories, reflecting a strategic focus on providing practical support and fostering innovation to achieve rapid success. Moderately represented themes, such as data collection & analysis and economic development, suggest their relevance varies depending on the specific goals of each coalition.

The second round of REM sessions shifted its focus to documenting and understanding the evolution of the coalitions and their work. Some of the benefits resulting from this evolution included:

Collaboration and networking: this resulted in success, which according to the coalitions would not have been possible without the BBBRC program.

Cross-sector collaboration: resulted in significant multiplier effects. Educational institutions contributed specialized research capabilities, technology transfer expertise, and robust talent pipelines that prepare workers with industry-specific skills. Industry partners provide crucial market intelligence, product development pathways, and direct employment opportunities that create sustainable economic growth. Meanwhile, community organizations ensure initiatives address local needs by providing cultural context, reaching diverse populations, and building grassroots support that enhances program adoption.

Community engagement and growth: it was critical for coalitions to involve communities in decision-making processes and ensure that initiatives benefit all community members, especially those historically distressed. This emphasis on community engagement underscores stakeholders' value and integral role in the process.

Although core projects varied by coalition, the flexibility in the implementation of these core projects across all coalitions resulted in evolution, which in turn ensured that workforce development efforts were responsive and bridged industry needs. This flexibility and responsiveness resulted in a diversification of resources and partners, further strengthening the sustainability of the coalition.

Multiple unplanned "ripple effects" emerged, extending far beyond their original objectives, including educational expansions, new collaborations, and industry evolution. These in turn resulted in successful models to naturally expand and created more value than planned activities, collectively opening new regional growth pathways. For example, one coalition implemented an ambassador program for training that was later adopted by community colleges and workforce development boards to engage faculty, staff, and students. Another coalition developed a summer youth entrepreneurship program that was later incorporated into the school year across the region.

Lastly, PCRD developed innovative graphics to showcase insights documented through the REM sessions. ***Figures 3, 4, and 5*** show the benefits, core, and catalytic areas and the themes that emerged from the discussions. For example, under coalition building, this coalition focused on manufacturing and education, industry support, hiring and talent attraction/retention, workforce development, and ecosystem building.

FIGURE 3. Coalition Building Benefits

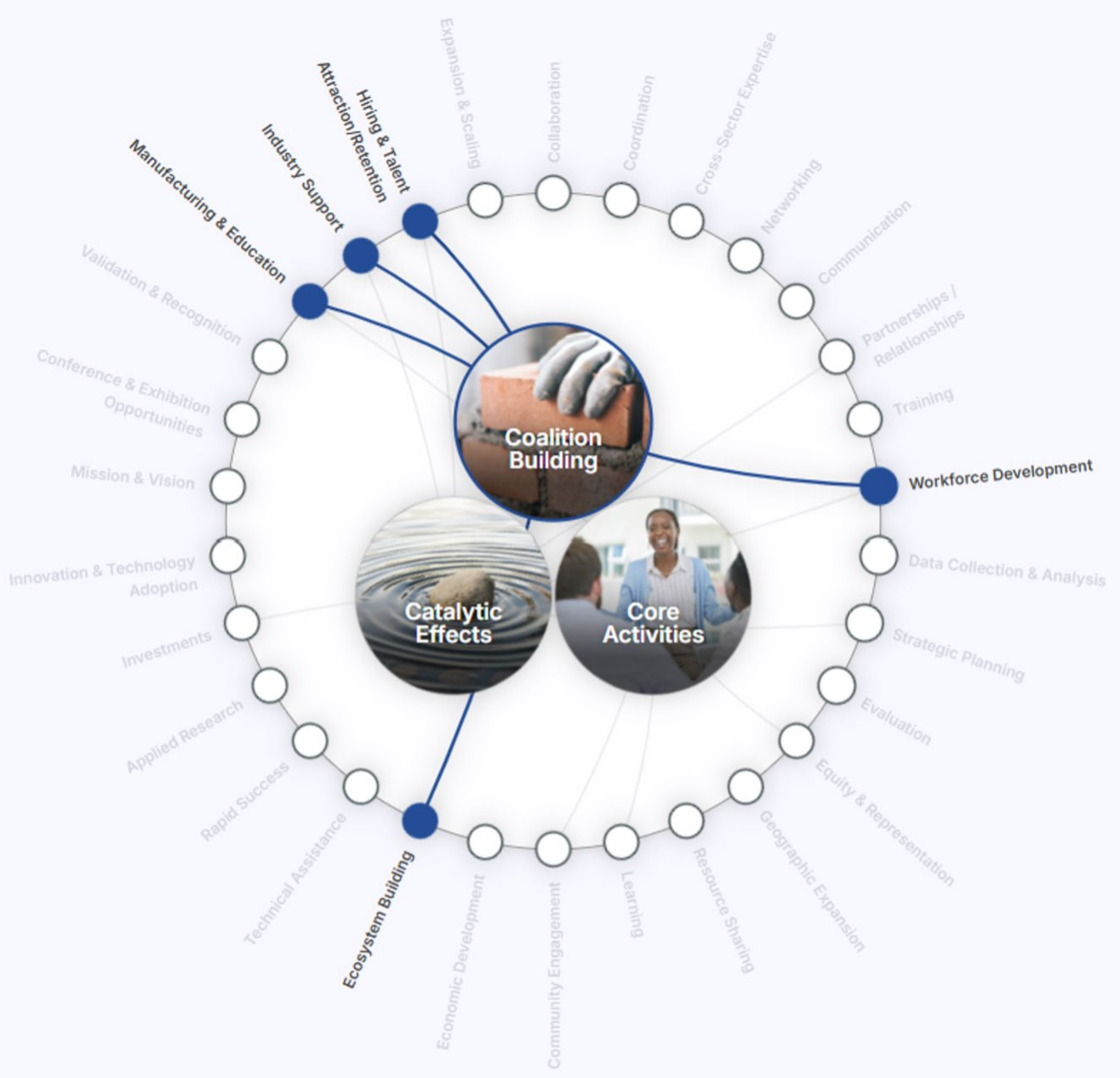


FIGURE 4. Core Activities

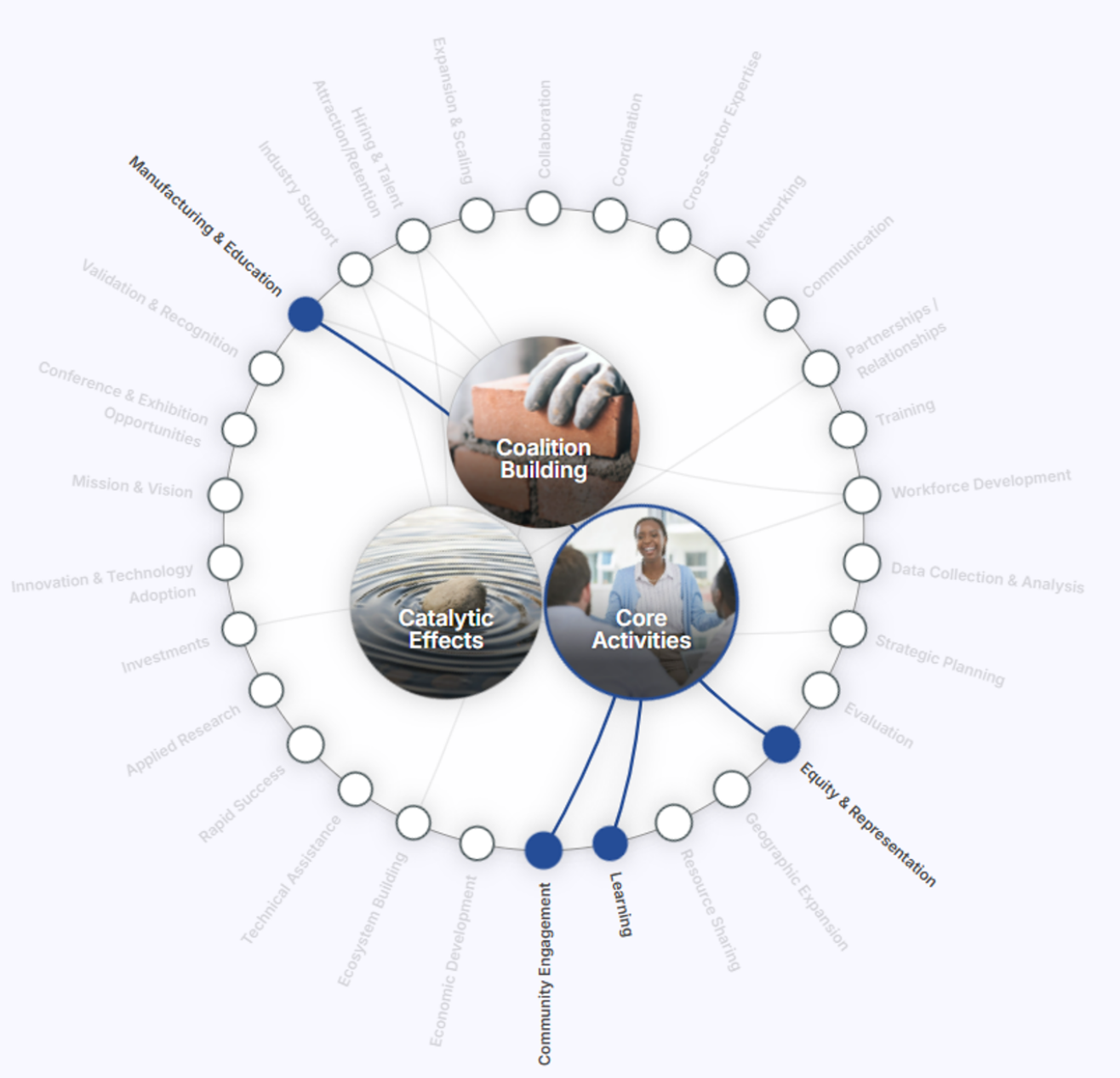
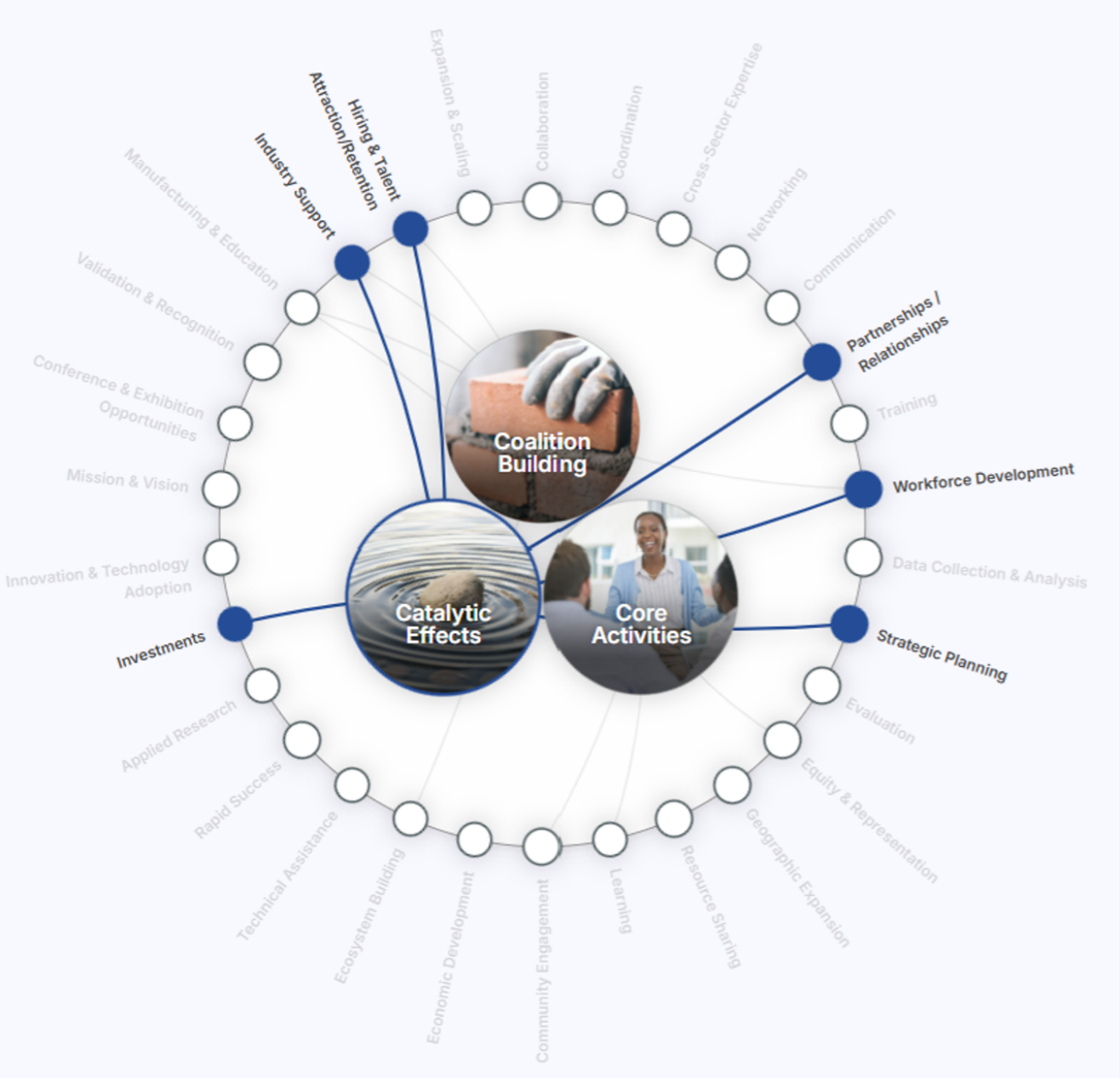


FIGURE 5. Catalytic Activities



In summary, the REM sessions documented that initially, coalitions were focused on building a strong ecosystem by strengthening partnerships and advancing core projects. Efforts in fostering collaboration enabled coalitions to effectively leverage collective resources and expertise, while emphasizing core projects streamlined efforts toward achieving their mission. Notable progress was documented in resource management, particularly securing investments and identifying new funding opportunities. Over time, these BBBRC seeds of collaboration grew into forests of interconnected activity reshaping their regions.

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE

The regional development literature finds that for any regional effort to be successful and sustainable, effective stakeholder engagement and governance are key (Guzman, Murray, Stern, & Williams, 2024). For this reason, the quarterly survey incorporated several questions to capture how this governance evolved over time.

A group of questions asked coalitions to self-identify if they communicated, coordinated, or collaborated with partners across all six focus areas of the grant: accelerated innovation in emerging technologies, help workers access new job opportunities and job training, increase new business growth and entrepreneurial activity, build critical enabling infrastructure, help businesses adopt new technologies and enter new markets, and sustain regional governance.

The distinction between communication, coordination, and collaboration is important for regional governance since it better gauges the quality and level of partnerships, effectiveness, and efficiency (Gutner & Heltberg, 2025). ***Figures 6-11*** breakdown the number of coalitions engaging by level of collaboration for all six program focus areas by quarter.

FIGURE 6. Accelerated Innovation in Emerging Technologies
No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration

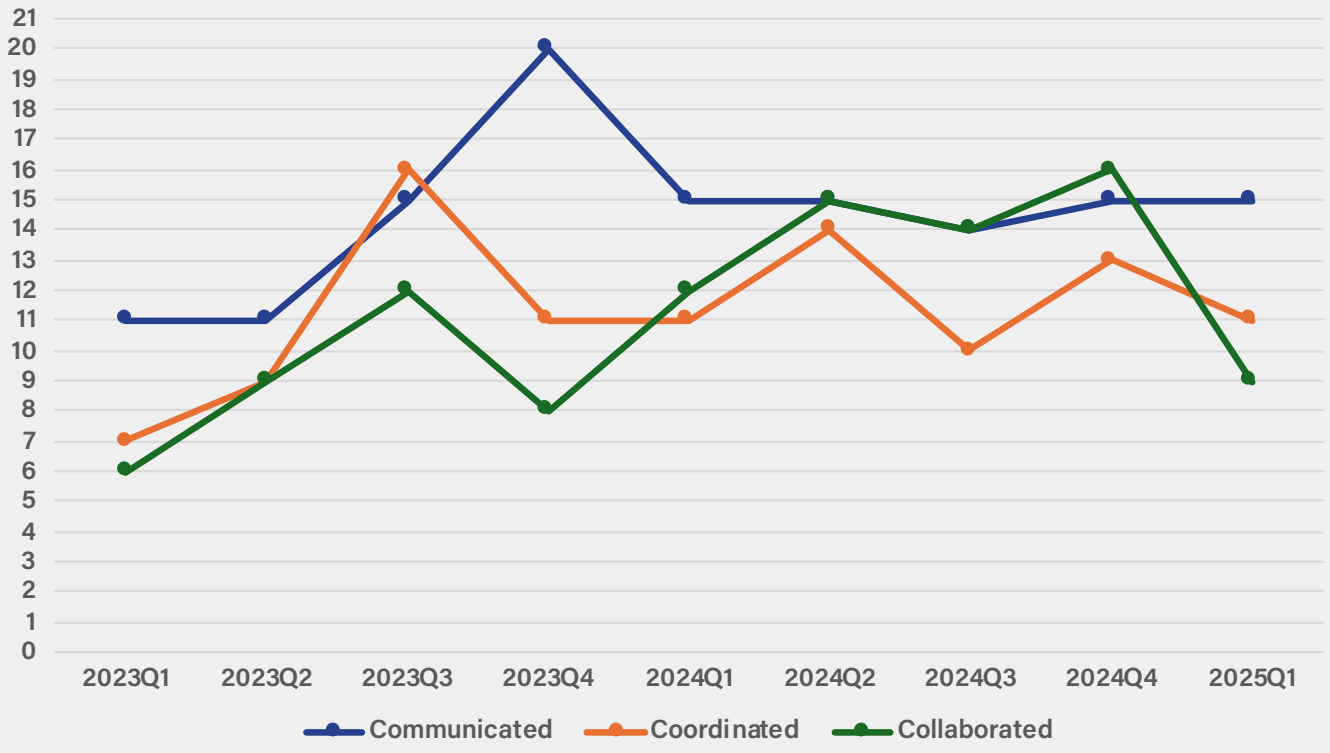


FIGURE 7. Help Workers Access New Job Opportunities and Job Training

No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration

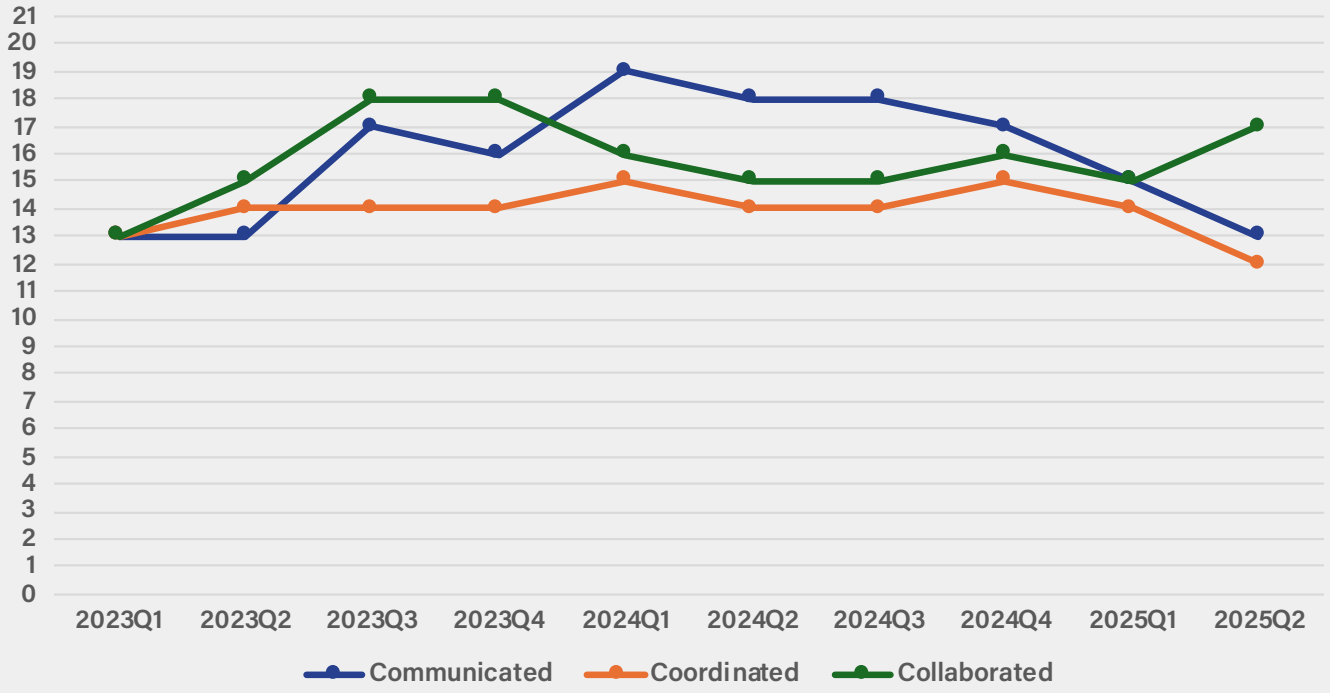


FIGURE 8. Increase New Business Growth and Entrepreneurial Activity

No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration

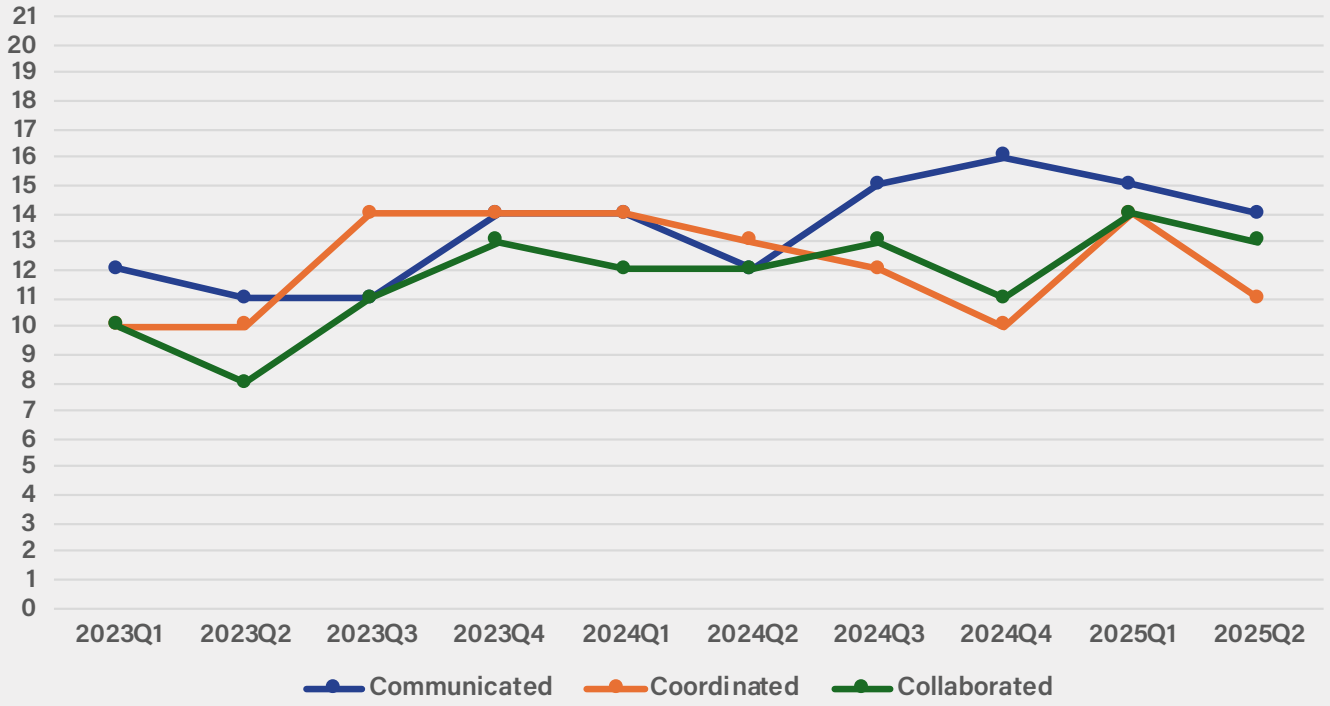


FIGURE 9. Build Critical Enabling Infrastructure

No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration

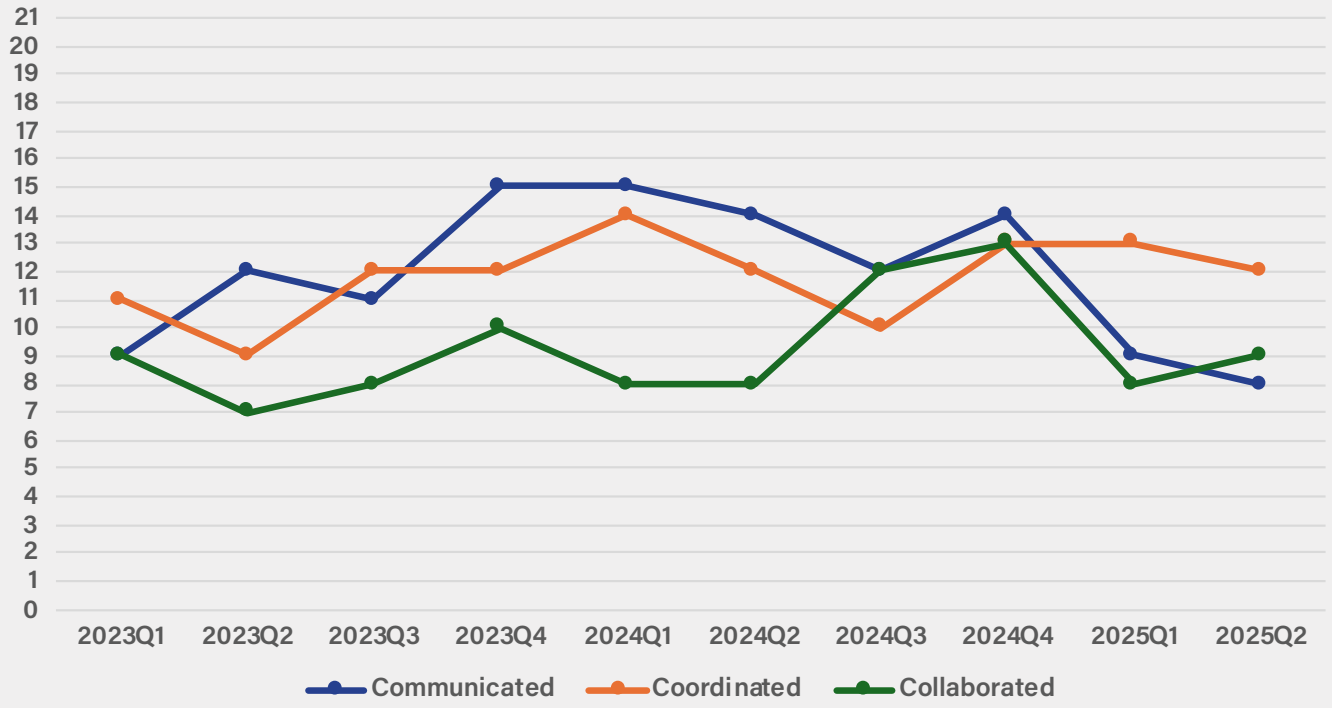


FIGURE 10. Help Businesses Adopt New Technologies and Enter New Markets

No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration

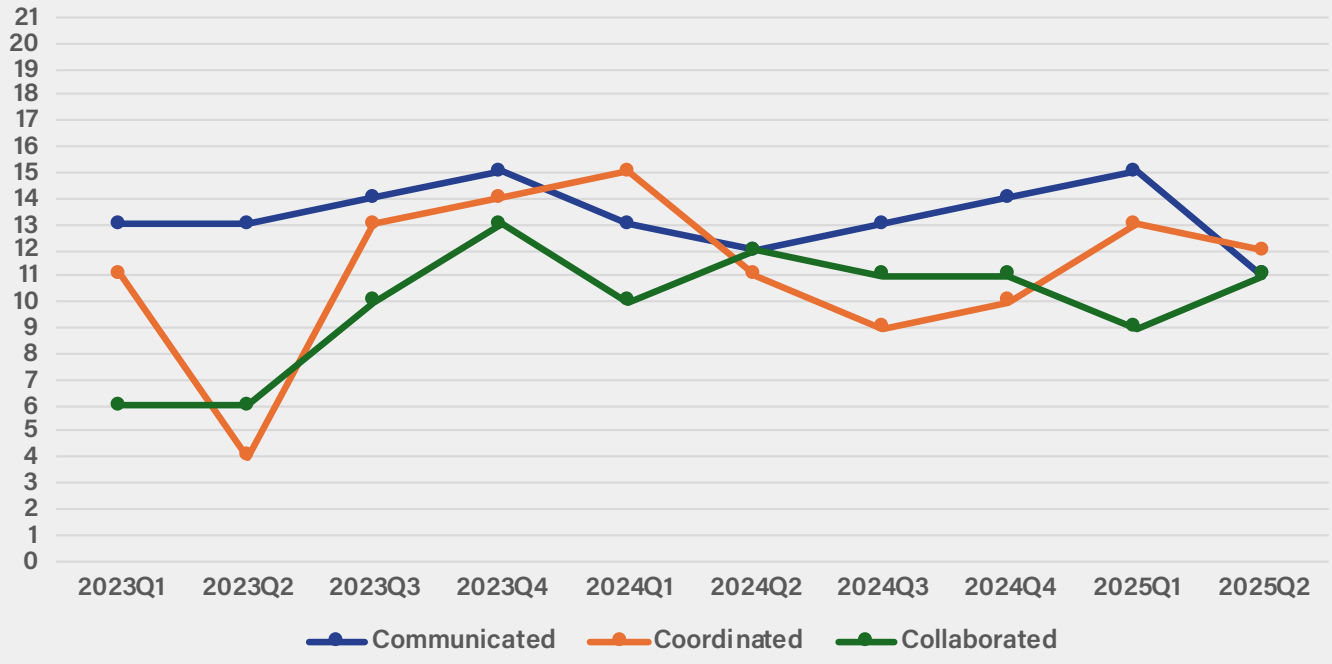
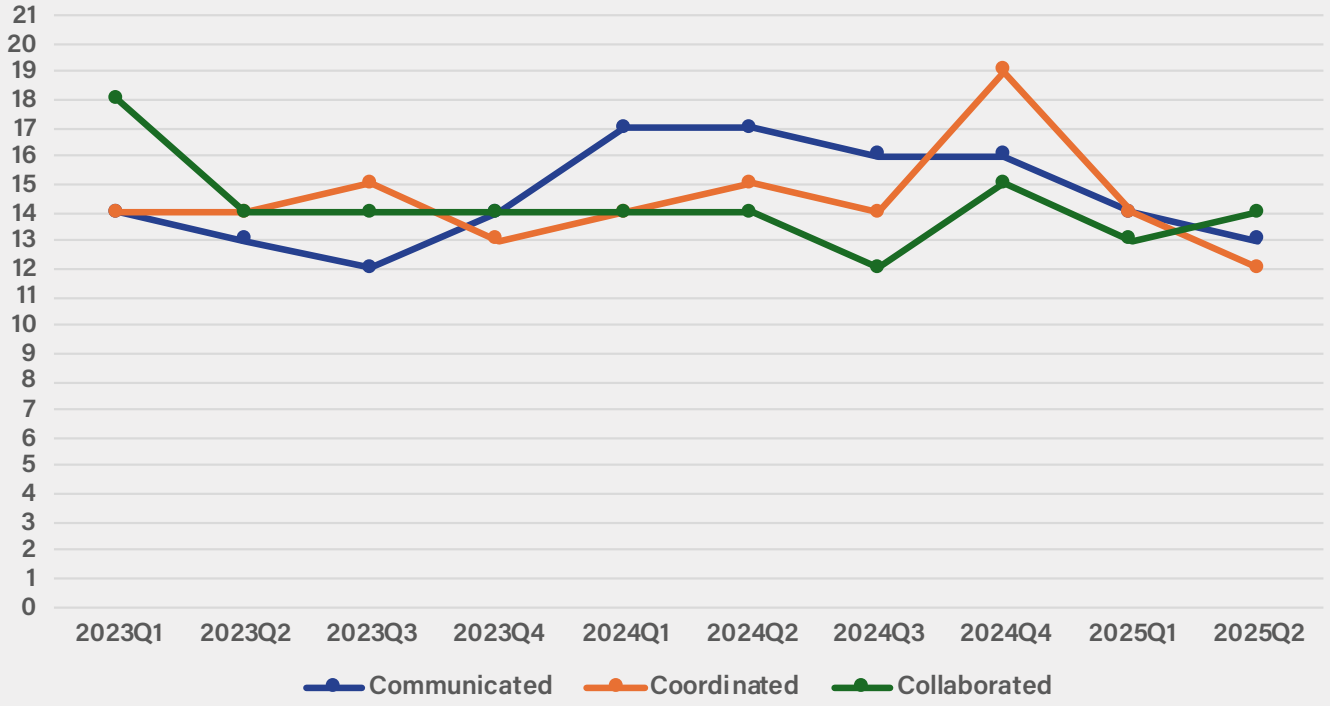


FIGURE 11. Sustain Regional Governance

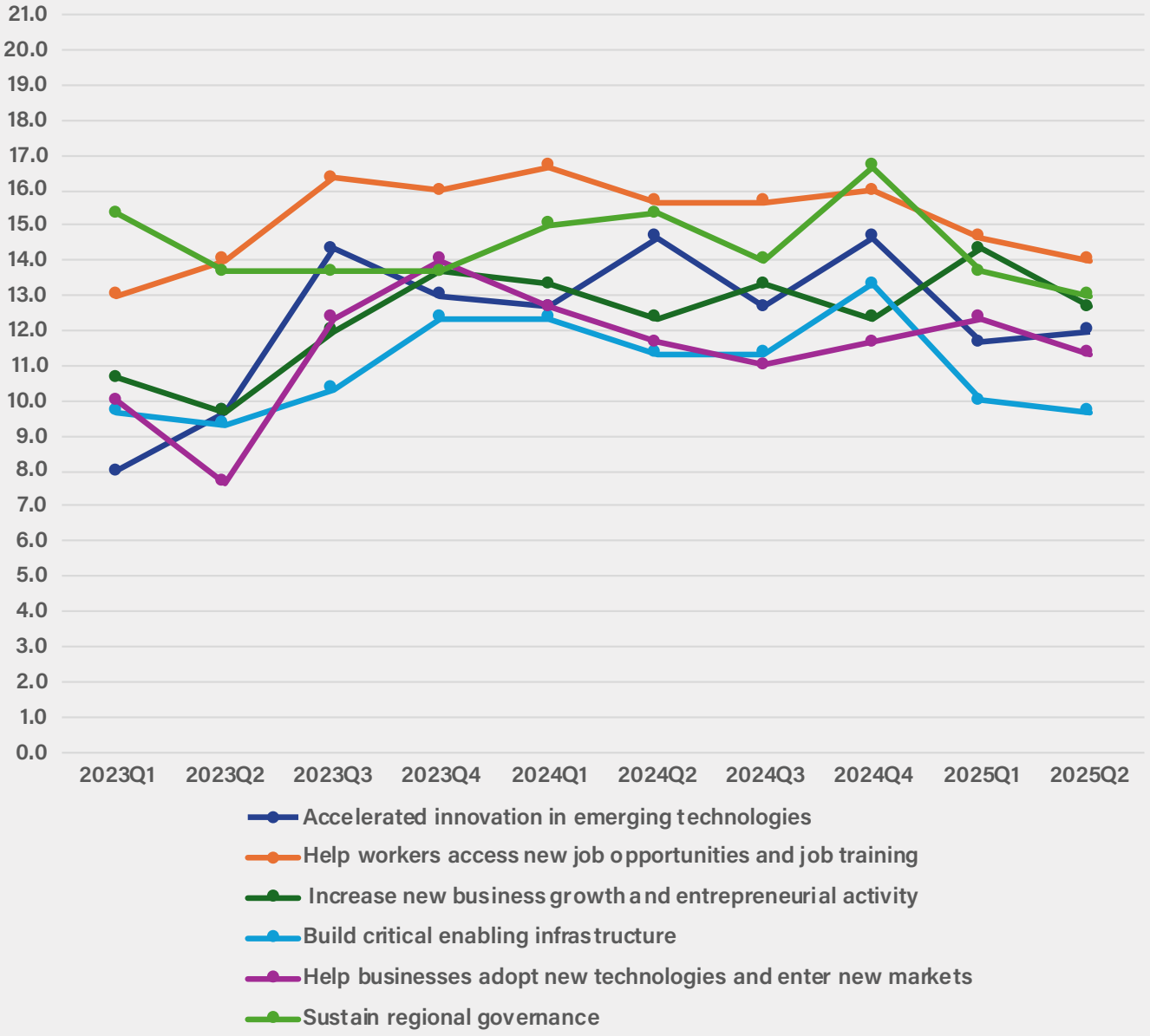
No. of Coalitions Engaging by Level of Collaboration



As expected, and given the program's complexity, coalitions engaged the most in communicating regardless of focus area, followed by coordinating and collaborating. Note that overall, a higher number of coalitions engaged across all levels of collaboration to help workers access new job opportunities and job training as well as to sustain regional governance.

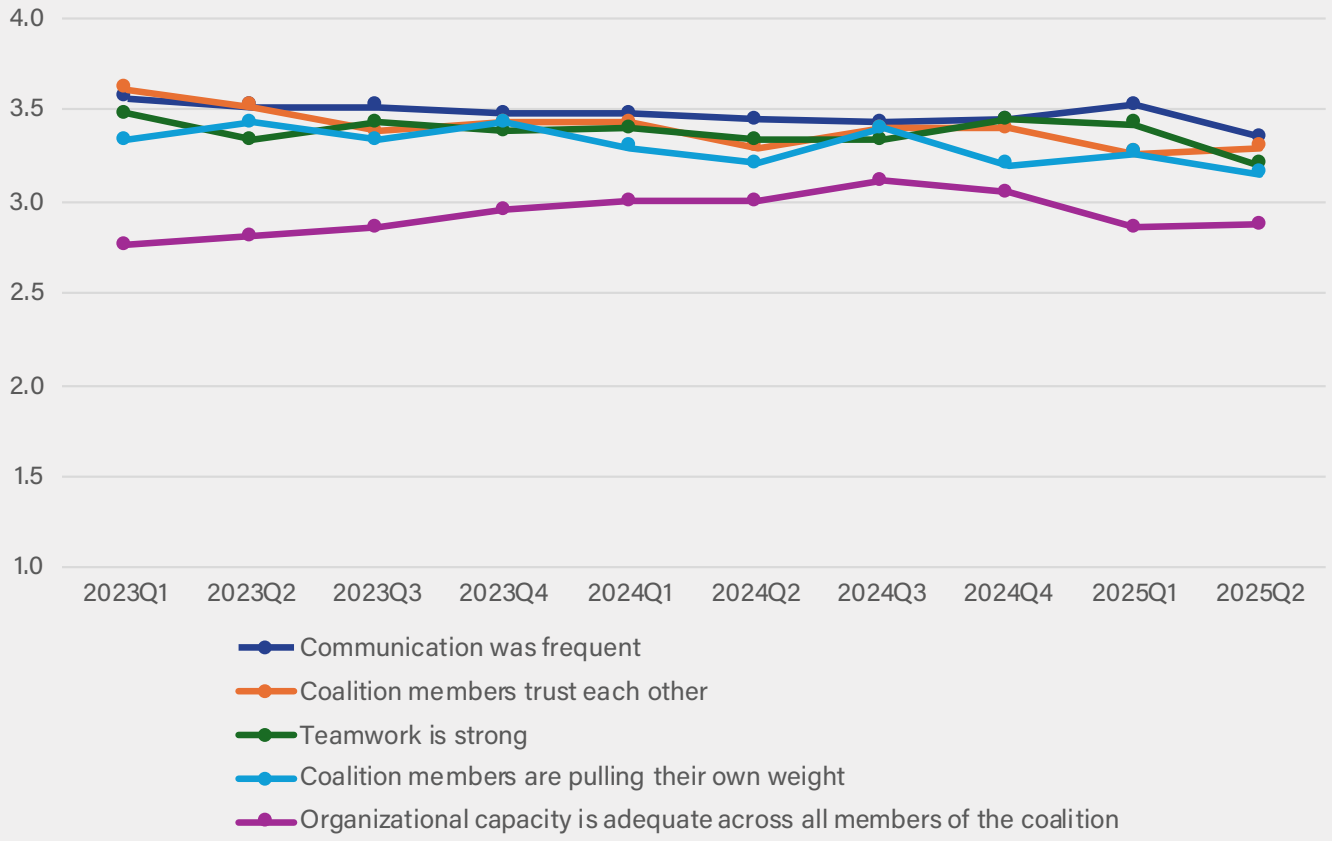
Figure 12 shows the average number of coalitions that engaged across all levels of collaboration by focus area. In other words, an average of coalitions reporting engaging in communication, coordination, and collaboration was calculated per focus areas by quarter. Here, again, we see that helping workers and sustaining regional governance had the highest number of coalitions. Building enabling infrastructure was the focus area with the lowest average number of coalitions engaging in collaboration levels.

FIGURE 12. Avg. No. of Coalitions that Communicated, Coordinated, and Collaborated by Focus Area and Quarter



Next, the survey asked coalitions their level of agreement or disagreement on several statements related to regional governance. ***Figure 13*** shows the average responses for the quarter. Agreement levels ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). As shown, coalitions agreed on average, since most values ranged between 3 (agree) and 4 (strongly agree), regardless of quarter and on most statements. Note, however, that the average value regarding the statement of adequate capacity showed disagreement in five of the ten quarters. Also note how agreement increased, peaked, and then decreased towards the end of the survey gathering period.

FIGURE 13. Average Agreement Level on Specific Regional Governance Statements



MACRO INDICATORS, EXISTING INDUSTRIAL CLUSTERS, AND ALIGNMENT WITH COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

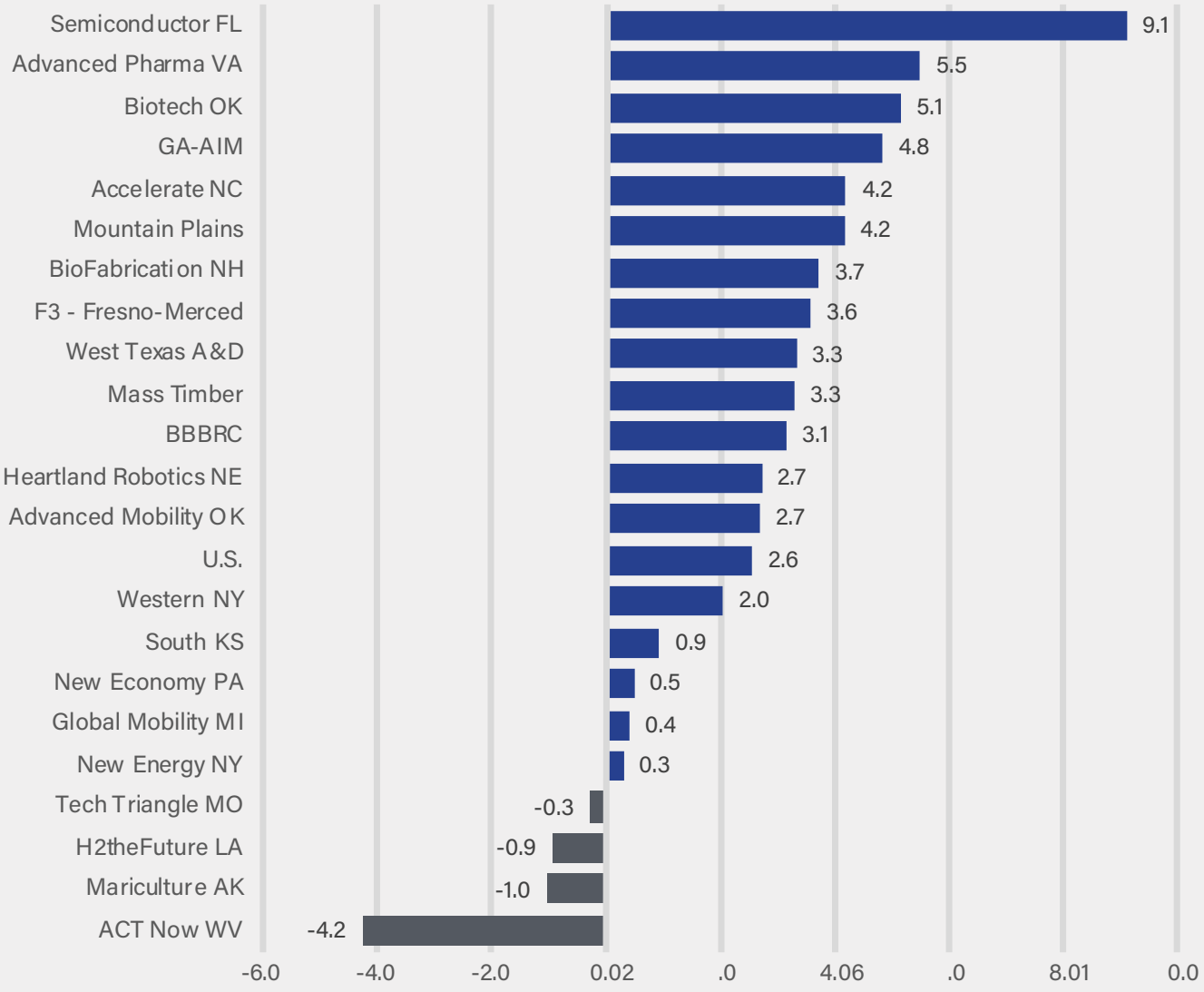
This section discusses information that provides a better understanding of 1) the macroeconomic baseline prior to the BBBRC interventions taking place (2022), 2) the preliminary indirect outcomes on BBBRC's activities on existing industrial clusters, and 3) the alignment of BBBRC activities with existing comprehensive economic development strategies (CEDS) or economic development strategic plans.

Given the multi-layered nature of this research to document several outcome levels of the initiative, this information sheds light on the less granular, indirect outcomes of the BBBRC. Keep in mind that aside from these macro indicators being noisier than survey and focus group information, their outcome typically takes longer to play out.

Regardless, a series of socioeconomic and demographic macro indicators were monitored to provide a baseline. This baseline provides a snapshot of the BBBRC coalitions prior to the program being implemented. Ideally, these indicators should continue to be monitored to document indirect positive outcomes of the program. For example, when 2027 data is available (four years after the BBBRC was launched), a comparison can be made with the baseline (2022) to see if any of these indicators moved in the expected direction given the BBBRC interventions.

Figure 14 shows the percent population change between 2017 and 2022 across each coalition, the BBBRC program overall, and the U.S. (as a point of reference). Notice how in four of the 21 coalitions, population declined before the BBBRC was launched. On the other hand, three coalitions experienced population growth of 5 percent or more.

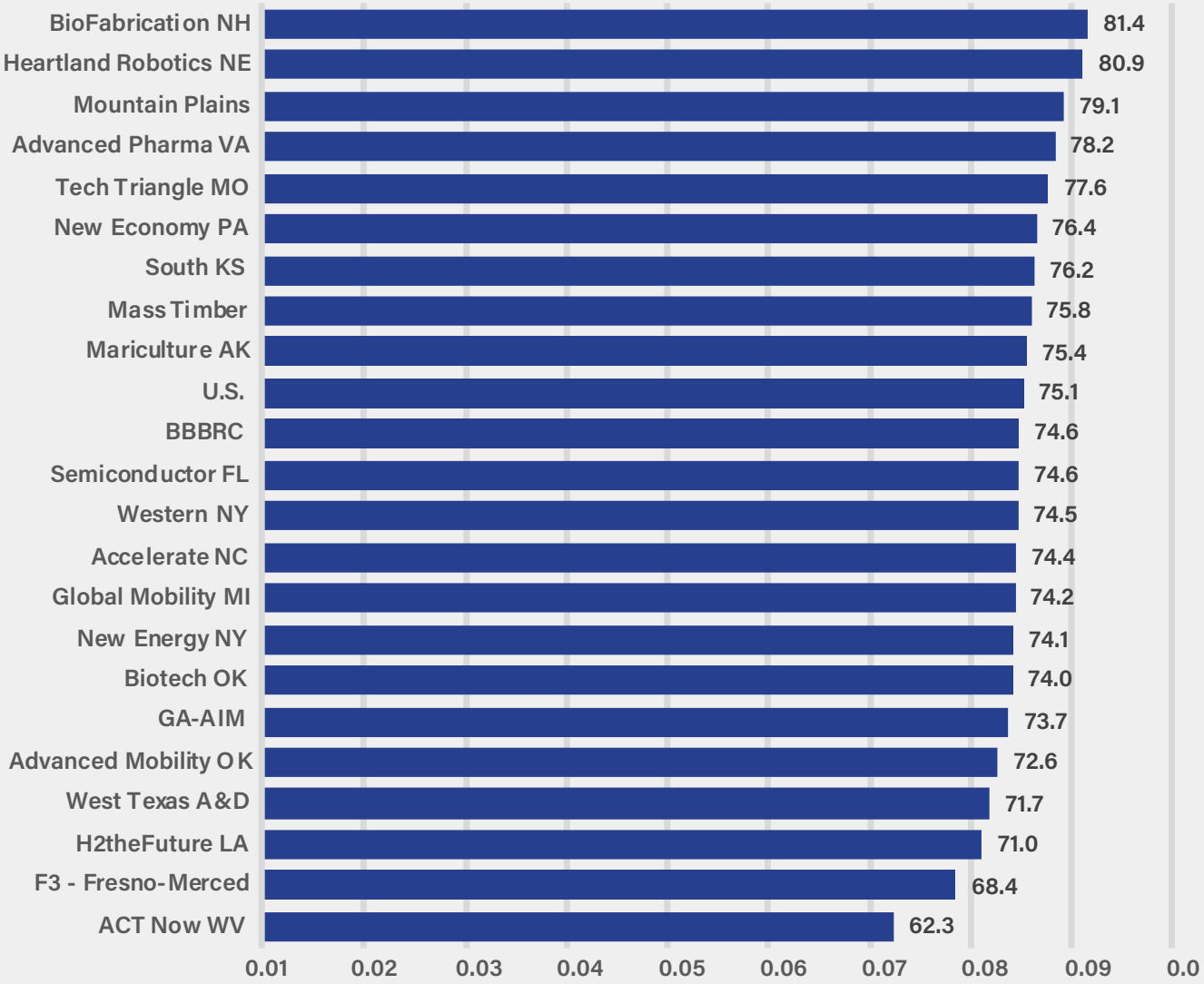
FIGURE 14. Percent Population Change: 2017-2022



Source: U.S. Census Population Estimates

Next, we look at the working age labor force participation rate. BBBRC efforts focused on training and placing workers in new jobs. So, theoretically, if the working age labor force participation rate remains the same or increases, partial credit could be given to the BBBRC program. As of 2022 (baseline year), this rate ranged from 62.3 percent in the ACT Now West Virginia coalition to 81.4 percent in the BioFabrication New Hampshire coalition. Nine of the 21 coalitions had working age labor force participation rates higher than the U.S. average.

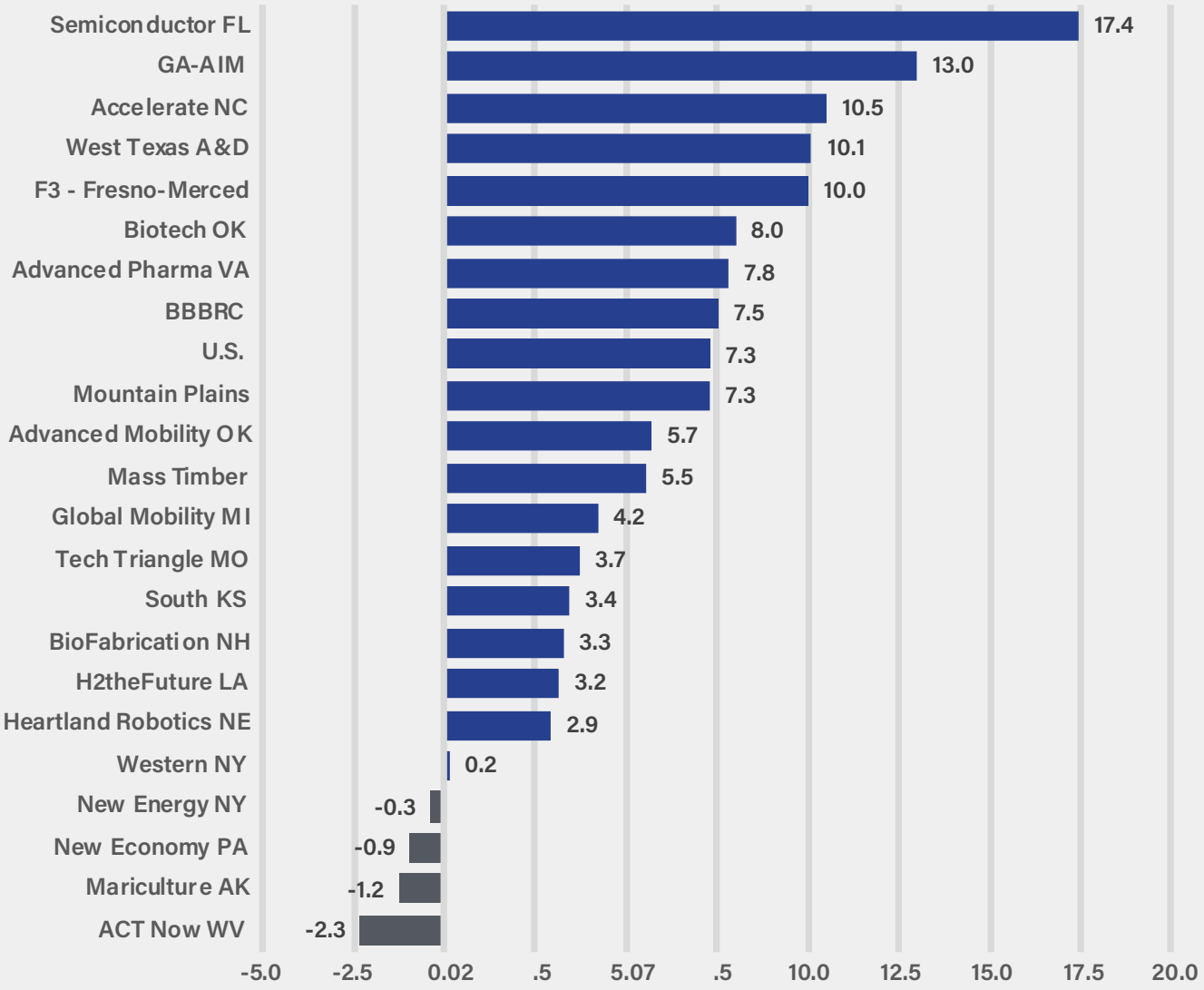
FIGURE 15. Working Age Labor Force Participation Rate: 2022



Source: 2018-2022 5-Year American Community Survey

Lastly, the ***Figure 16*** shows the percentage change in total jobs in each of the coalitions, the BBBRC overall, and the U.S. between 2017 and 2022. The BBBRC has created hundreds of jobs so this metric should trend in the positive direction for the coalitions involved. Notice how four coalitions experienced employment decline prior to the BBBRC being implemented.

FIGURE 16. Percent Employment Change: 2017-2022



Source: Lightcast

As mentioned before, these indicators are affected by multiple additional factors, not only BBBRC efforts. Regardless, it is important to monitor and keep track of the trends in these indicators to better contextualize the outcome of the program.

Next, we reviewed pre-defined industrial clusters from the Harvard Cluster project, the Council for Community and Economic Research (C2ER), and PCRD that aligned best with the BBBRC efforts of the coalitions (number of matching clusters are shown in parenthesis). Our rationale was that these indicators are less noisy and thus, any trends in the expected direction may be the indirect results of BBBRC efforts. In addition, the outcome may be documented sooner. Again, ideally, future years should be monitored and compared to the baseline year when the BBBRC interventions launched to identify trends in the expected direction.

Table 1 shows the BBBRC coalitions, the industrial clusters that best aligned with their efforts, the number of industries included, and the total change in the coalition and cluster employment. As shown, most industrial clusters across coalitions gained jobs (14 coalitions) between 2017 and 2022. Other clusters (7 coalitions) lost jobs. BBBRC efforts should improve these trends as the program winds down.

TABLE 1. BBBRC Coalitions and Their Relationship With Industry Clusters

Coalition Name	Industrial Cluster(s)	No. of Industries	% Employment Change 2017-2022
Accelerate NC (1)	Life Sciences Manufacturing	40	+6.4
ACT Now WV (1)	Renewable Energy	10	-77.2
Advanced Mobility OK (1)	Aerospace Vehicles & Defense	17	+72.9
Advanced Pharma VA (1)	Biopharmaceuticals	4	+9.3
BioFabrication NH (1)	Biomedical Sciences	13	+28.3
Biotech OK (2)	Biomedical/Technical	40	+8.8
F3 - Fresno-Merced (1)	Agribusiness, Food Processing & Technology	70	-3.4
GA-AIM (1)	Manufacturing Supercluster	143	+7.4
Global Mobility MI (1)	Automotive	19	+0.1
H2theFuture LA (1)	Energy (Fossil and Renewable)	67	-8.0
Heartland Robotics NE (1)	Agribusiness, Food Processing & Technology	70	+1.5
Mariculture AK (1)	Fishing and Fishing Products	6	-9.1
Mass Timber OR (1)	Forest and Wood Products	50	+1.8
Mountain Plains (1)	Business and Financial Services	75	+27.7
New Economy PA (1)	Advanced Industry Supercluster	45	-2.0
New Energy NY (1)	Renewable Energy	10	-63.0
Semiconductor FL (1)	Computer and Electronic Product Manufacturing	24	+11.9
South KS (3)	Aerospace Vehicles and Defense	73	-5.0
Tech Triangle MO (2)	Advanced Materials	127	+1.0
West Texas A&D	Aerospace Vehicles & Defense	17	+79.5
Western NY	Engineering-Intensive Manufacturing	116	+6.4

Lastly, we reviewed state and regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDS) to identify alignment with the BBBRC efforts. When these plans align, it creates a mutually beneficial outcome—advancing the shared goals of US EDA and local economic development districts (EDDs), while also creating collaborative opportunities within and beyond the region. We used the BBBRC project summaries as well as from the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness' (CREC) State and Local Economic Development Strategies database to identify areas of alignment. We also conducted an online search for more current CEDS or other economic development plans to identify more current economic development strategy documents.

This analysis was purely descriptive since BBBRC project summaries varied in detail and there is also significant variance in the format and details of CEDS and economic development plans available. ***Table 2*** suggests that most of the BBBRC efforts do align with the CEDS or plans from their respective states, economic development districts, or regional planning commissions. The numbers in the table below showcase the number of CEDS or state and regional plans that align with the BBBRC efforts.

Not all regions had aligning plans or strategies. For instance, the scan completed did not identify any regional or state-level plans or CEDS that align with the Western New York coalition efforts. This coalition struggled with its governance and coordination with EDA throughout much of the project. In other instances, such as in South Kansas, the BBBRC efforts aligned more with Statewide priorities and targets.

Similarly, in regions like St. Louis the work aligned with identified priorities identified by an EDD in part of the region (Southwest Illinois), but the effort was led primarily by other economic development groups (e.g., Greater St. Louis, Inc., St. Louis Economic Development Partnership, BioSTL, etc.) that less directly connected to US EDA. As a result, the BBBRC advanced regional priorities, just not necessarily those explicitly identified in a regional CEDS.

TABLE 2. BBBRC Coalitions and Their Relationship With Economic Development Plans

Coalition Name	State	EDD/CEDS
Accelerate NC*	1	9
ACT Now WV		4
Advanced Mobility OK		1
Advanced Pharma VA	2	2
BioFabrication NH	1	2
Biotech OK	1	1
F3 - Fresno-Merced	2	
GA-AIM*	2	1
Global Mobility MI	1	1
H2theFuture LA		4
Heartland Robotics NE*	1	5

* Denotes statewide or multi-state coalition

TABLE 2. BBBRC Coalitions and Their Relationship With Economic Development Plans (cont.)

Coalition Name	State	EDD/CEDS
Mariculture AK	1	1
Mass Timber OR*	1	11
Mountain Plains*	4	28
New Economy PA		1
New Energy NY		1
Semiconductor FL		2
South KS	1	
Tech Triangle MO	1	4
West Texas A&D		1
Western NY		

* Denotes statewide or multi-state coalition

LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

Through this multi-layered, mixed method approach, we obtained valuable insights and documented best practices and lessons learned. See below:

The BBBRC program produced significant output. As documented by the survey data, the REM sessions, and the macro-indicators monitored, the program had a significant outcome. Granted, since the economy of some coalitions are too large, discerning the outcome of a program like BBBRC is difficult, if not impossible. However, this is why the research design was multi-layered, to more clearly distinguish the outcome levels. At the most granular level or a direct result of the initiative, the outcome was significant. For every $1 BBBRC spent, coalitions leveraged $4 more, primarily from the private sector. Thousands of jobs were created or retained, hundreds of businesses created, and thousands of workers were placed in jobs they would otherwise would not have.

Additional direct outcomes or more granular data, the REM sessions documented unanticipated ripples such as expanding networks and partners, strengthening collaboration and synergies, and scaling programs. For less granular or indirect outcomes of the initiative, the BBBRC aligned well with existing economic development strategies, providing momentum to these efforts, augmented or strengthened existing industrial clusters, contributing to their competitiveness. The indirect outcome of the initiative on socioeconomic or demographic macro indicators remains to be seen. Lastly, at the less granular level (macro indicators), the trends were favorable, and certainly the BBBRC played a role in this.

Do not limit focus to what participants were funded to do. Documenting and understanding not only what participants learn and ultimately implement but also the governance dictating how they operated is equally or more important than documenting traditional program outputs and outcomes. As discussed previously, coalitions adapted and evolved based on what they were learning. This in turn made them more responsive by adapting their engagement and governance mechanisms resulting in more diverse partners and resources, significantly strengthening sustainability, outcome, and relevance. The inclusion of governance related questions to the survey provided additional insights into this dynamic.

Multi-layered data gathering methodologies along with program compliance results in overwhelming reporting. Our survey instrument aligned with the program's goals to measure outcomes and progress and added governance-related questions. This resulted in a rich survey instrument, but also a complex and hard to interpret. Data validation was a joint effort, and we feel it strengthened trust, rather than eroding it, while at the same time strengthening the data gathered and reported.

In addition to the instrument complexity, since data was gathered at the coalition level, this required gathering and merging data from multiple projects within a coalition, prior to submitting the quarterly responses. Supporting materials were developed and office hours implemented to help coalitions better compile, merge, and complete the quarterly survey. Custom tools were developed, like one to help identify rural areas in their regions. Despite these efforts, coalitions constantly reported that submitting the survey was no easy ordeal. On top of this, program compliance complicated things. Future projects need to simplify reporting to the extent possible and ideally, co-design the survey instruments (see last lesson learned).

Overcommunicate. This may be a no-brainer to regional developers, but we figured it was worth including. This BBBRC project was complex and included the funder, coalitions, and research partners. While meetings did take place between some of these players, the lack of a mechanism to symmetrically and collectively troubleshoot, communicate, and brainstorm generated significant challenges. Conflicting or unclear understanding and messaging had to constantly be clarified. Participant roles and expectations changed, creating additional challenges. A quarterly all-hands-on-deck meeting, with a defined agenda and objectives, would have helped. Also, barriers to publish or disseminate critical information undermined the ability for coalitions to react/respond and adapt accordingly. Moreover, it limited their ability to share this information with their own stakeholders, justifying the labor-intensive effort of gathering the data to begin with.

Co-design and co-own. Perhaps our largest shortcoming was not working more collaboratively with coalitions to design the survey. In other words, making this a true community-based research project. This would have not only made it easier for them to interpret and respond to the survey but also incorporate their measures of success. We instead decided to co-design with the funder and retroactively train the coalitions. In the end, we gained the trust of the coalitions, but overlooking this complicated the program implementation.

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