TRANSATLANTIC DIALOGUE ON THE INDUSTRIAL HEARTLANDS

UNLOCKING DEMOCRACY

Lessons from America's Industrial Heartlands

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INTRODUCTION

The industrial heartlands of the United States and Germany have long been engines of prosperity, built on strong, vibrant manufacturing communities, and have made key contributions to national economies. Yet, as industries have declined, these regions have faced economic hardship, population loss, and political disillusionment. Across the industrial heartlands, many residents feel left behind, fueling political narratives that exploit economic anxieties.

In the United States, far-right populism has surged during the Trump administrations, deepening these vulnerabilities. Misinformation, polarization, and declining trust, even in local governments, have weakened democratic institutions, making a shared vision increasingly difficult. The ongoing dismantling of U.S. state structures by the Trump administration is propelling this at an unprecedented scale and speed, posing severe challenges for the heartlands and simultaneously increasing the importance of local and regional entities in managing their transformation.

Following Germany's snap federal election on February 23, 2025, a coalition government of Conservatives and Social Democrats is likely, while the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) doubled its vote share and became the biggest opposition party. Amid economic recession and with distrust of democratic institutions at an all-time high, heartland revitalization remains key for Germany's political and economic future.

The Industrial Heartlands Fellows Working Group on Perspectives for the Future, Respect & Participation comprises six young professionals from the United States and Germany. As part of the "Transatlantic Dialogue on the Industrial Heartlands" project, we traveled to Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan in October 2024, engaging with numerous organizations and individuals who are deeply involved in shaping the future of the industrial heartlands. Our engagements provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in these regions. This policy brief reflects on our findings, and aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and change makers in both the United States and Germany. The report also serves as a precursor to our next phase of exploration—a trip through Germany's industrial heartlands in the fall of 2025.

This transatlantic initiative underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing contemporary challenges in our societies.

EXISTING CHALLENGES IN THE INDUSTRIAL HEARTLANDS

The industrial heartlands have long struggled with the economic fallout of collapsed industries and overreliance on single-sector economies. An entire region would be built around one industry, making its decline devastating and far-reaching in its impacts. From the steel mills of Pittsburgh to the strip mines of Cottbus, deindustrialization has left a void in local economies, stripping communities of stable, well-paying jobs. While some areas have begun to recover, deep structural barriers—underinvestment, outdated infrastructure, and fragmented regional coordination—continue to stall progress.

Our goal: ensuring economic opportunity for all who call the industrial heartlands home.

Socially, these regions grapple with population loss and an aging workforce. Politically, they face deepening polarization and a growing erosion of trust in institutions. Many residents feel disconnected from government and vulnerable to extreme political messaging, while others have fallen into political disengagement and apathy.

The challenge is not just economic renewal, but also the restoration of civic confidence through policies that empower local voices, strengthen regional identities, and connect the future of these communities to their industrial legacies in new and sustainable ways.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: REBUILDING TRUST IN DEMOCRACY

To address these challenges and lay the groundwork for a stronger future in postindustrial regions, we propose the following policy recommendations. These policies are designed to guide local, regional, state, and federal leaders—both those we met on our tour and those we will engage with in Germany—in efforts to revitalize local economies, strengthen civic engagement, and rebuild regional identities.

01.

EXPAND FUNDING AND AUTHORITY FOR REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN THE INDUSTRIAL HEARTLANDS

Policy focus: Establish dedicated, stable funding for regional economic development organizations (EDOs) and regional planning organizations (RPOs) in the industrial heartlands, ensuring they have the resources to coordinate economic strategy, workforce development, and infrastructure planning at a regional scale.

Rationale: The industrial Midwest is governed in fragments—small municipalities with independent tax bases, land use laws, and infrastructure systems. While this system allows for local decision-making, it fractures economic strategy, weakens collective bargaining power, and pits communities against each other for jobs, infrastructure funding, and investment. The result? Regional paralysis. No single entity has the authority to plan for long-term prosperity, and too many communities are left to struggle alone instead of working toward shared success.

Core cities in the industrial Midwest region typically have less than 25% of the total population of the metropolitan areas of which they are the centers.

Civic leaders in Pittsburgh have often noted that Allegheny County—just one of the eight counties in the Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area—has over a hundred self-governing communities. Core cities in the industrial Midwest region typically have less than 25% of the total population of the metropolitan areas of which they are the centers. Among the communities we visited on this fellowship tour, only Erie, PA, had more than 15%. *(see Table 1 on page 5)*

Because of this fragmentation, EDOs, RPOs, and regional bodies serve a critical convening function, bringing together stakeholders such as local governments, businesses, utility providers, and workforce groups to plan for regional growth. Regional authorities are also empowered to disseminate allocated funds and provide technical assistance for transportation infrastructure, telecommunications, workforce development programs, renewable energy programs, and much more. However, they lack both stable funding and real statutory authority, forcing them to operate at the margins of policymaking. Reliant on inconsistent grants and voluntary cooperation, they often lack the power to enforce regional strategies, leaving long-term economic planning at the mercy of shifting local politics and the parochial interests of suburban municipalities.

Germany provides a useful precedent: the Strukturstärkungsgesetz (Structural Strengthening Act), enacted in 2020, funds regional planning entities to guide coal-dependent regions through economic transition, infrastructure investment, and workforce redevelopment. It demonstrates how federal investment in regional planning can drive economic transformation. In the United States, Minnesota's Metropolitan Council provides a domestic example of a well-funded regional planning body with statutory authority, allowing for more effective economic coordination across municipal borders.

TABLE 1

Core Community	City Population	Total Metro Population	% of Metro Area Population
Pittsburgh	303,843	2,365,501	12.84%
Erie	94,826	270,495	35.06%
Youngstown	60,048	540,328	11.11%
Detroit	636,787	4,375,604	14.55%

Data: 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Implementation:

1. **Establish dedicated federal and state funding streams:**
   a. Create a sustained funding model for economic development and RPOs, reducing reliance on volatile local funding sources.
   b. Structure funding to require collaboration across metropolitan areas, fostering regional networks that align with modern economic realities.

2. **Expand regional coordination and multi-state collaboration:**
   a. Encourage formalized consortia of RPOs and EDOs to share best practices on industry development, investment attraction, and civic engagement.
   b. Prioritize federal funding for regional initiatives in workforce development, infrastructure, and environmental sustainability that span multiple jurisdictions.

3. **Strengthen governance and decision-making capacity:**
   a. Promote governance models like that of Minnesota's Metropolitan Council, which has independent funding and statutory authority for regional planning.
   b. Support local leadership development and public engagement efforts to ensure residents have a voice in shaping economic policies.

4. **Leverage existing regional commissions and organizations:**
   a. Support congressional funding of the Great Lakes Authority (GLA) at its authorized level of $33 million and encourage presidential appointment of a federal co-chair to oversee coordination among participating states (Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and New York) of which the respective governors are co-chairs.
   b. Enhance partnerships with established, collaborative international governing bodies such as the Great Lakes Commission,[1] Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers (GSGP),[2] and the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative[3] to align economic development with environmental sustainability efforts.

[1] https://www.glc.org/
[2] https://www.gsgp.org/
[3] https://www.glslcities.org/

02.

PROVIDE DEFERENCE AND FLEXIBILITY TO LOCAL HEARTLAND COMMUNITIES

Policy focus: Strengthen local self-determination in industrial heartland communities by expanding their autonomy over federal funding awards and reducing restrictive oversight that limits locally and regionally driven economic strategies. Additionally, enhance cities' ability to engage in regional, national, and international partnerships that support innovation and strategic growth.

Rationale: Empowering local governments with greater flexibility and autonomy is not just about improving access to funding—it is also about ensuring they have the capabilities to define and execute their own development strategies. Industrial heartland communities have often been constrained by rigid, top-down federal programs that fail to respond to local challenges and opportunities.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) has already shown what a better model could look like by providing direct, flexible funding to cities without the traditional silos and bureaucratic management. Erie, PA, has received $76 million—equivalent to 74% of its annual operating budget—and Youngstown, OH, has received $82.7 million, nearly 40% of its budget. This financial autonomy has allowed communities to invest in solutions tailored to their specific needs, reinforcing local agency and governance.

Communities on our tour showcased the powerful impact of self-directed investment. In Erie, PA, the revitalization of Erie Malleable Iron demonstrated how federal resources, when aligned with local priorities, can drive both economic renewal and social prosperity. In Youngstown, the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation's work has gone far beyond eliminating blight—it has revitalized entire neighborhoods, restored historic homes, and helped rebuild a city that the next generation can take pride in. Similarly, the Youngstown Business Incubator has fostered homegrown entrepreneurship, proving how economic development and community well-being can be meaningfully interconnected when cities have direct control over their development strategies.

Sustaining this momentum requires systemic changes. State preemption laws, rigid funding silos, and bureaucratic hurdles still limit local decision-making. Reducing these barriers will enable local autonomy, support tailored long-term economic strategies, strengthen regional collaboration, and remove unnecessary regulatory obstacles.

When local governments have the authority to address their own challenges, trust in democratic institutions grows. Engaging residents in problem-solving fosters civic life, public investment, and economic resilience.

Implementation:

1. **Expand ARPA-like flexible federal and state funding models:**

   a. Federal and state governments should prioritize ARPA-like block grant funding models that allow local governments to determine spending priorities without excessive state or federal constraints.
   b. Increase the amount of "ungebundene Mittel" (uncommitted funds) for municipalities to ensure that smaller communities—many of which lack dedicated grant-writing staff and capacity—can effectively use funding for their priorities.

2. **Strengthen global collaboration initiatives:** The Industrial Heartlands Initiative exemplifies how international collaboration can drive local renewal and how subnational diplomacy efforts are catalytic. This transatlantic partnership brings together young leaders from Germany and the United States—individuals who grew up or currently live in postindustrial regions—to exchange ideas, develop policy solutions, and foster mutual learning. Expanding and institutionalizing such partnerships through chambers of commerce, EDOs, and universities will expose local leaders to global perspectives and practices that can be adapted for local contexts.

3. **Leverage university and research institution networks:** Universities are essential conduits for international engagement. Programs like the Innovation Beehive at Penn State Behrend demonstrate how higher education institutions can link local communities with global innovation networks. Expanding these collaborations through joint research, student exchanges, and international incubators can help local economies remain competitive and forward-looking.

4. **Replicate and scale successful models:** Programs like the Appalachian Regional Commission's (ARC) POWER Grant, Pittsburgh's International Living Building Challenge out of Phipps Conservatory, and the Michigan Economic Development Corporation's formal Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with national and local partners provide blueprints for successful regional collaboration. Agencies, when able, should invest in scaling these models to other regions, providing communities with the tools to implement customized solutions.

03.

EMPOWER INDUSTRIAL HEARTLAND LEADERS: BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY-DRIVEN CHANGE

Policy focus: Strengthen local leadership capacity and foster bottom-up democratic engagement in postindustrial regions by activating distributed leadership models that harness the expertise and energy of community networks, business leaders, and civic institutions.

Rationale: The industrial heartlands must lean into their unique strengths and empower their leaders to chart purposeful paths forward. However, the ability of local leadership to drive meaningful change is often constrained by legal, structural, and resource-based barriers.

Local elected officials, such as mayors and city managers, frequently operate within governance frameworks that limit their authority over regional economic development, infrastructure planning, and workforce strategies. Many postindustrial regions suffer from fragmented governance, where multiple jurisdictions compete for resources rather than collaborate. This not only weakens coordination efforts but also hinders the ability of leaders to implement long-term, region-wide strategies.

Beyond elected officials, business owners, nonprofit directors, union leaders, and civic organizers also play a crucial role in shaping industrial heartland communities. However, these non-governmental leaders often lack access to the funding, networks, and institutional support necessary to implement scalable solutions. While many are willing to take action, they face systemic barriers—ranging from restrictive funding mechanisms to limited platforms for collaboration.

> Empowerment, therefore, is not simply a matter of leadership willpower but also one of structural and institutional capacity.

Implementation:

1. **Activate distributed leadership models:**

   a. Facilitate the creation of and reengage existing local coalitions that include business leaders, civic organizations, educational institutions, and community advocates.
   b. Highlight the German federal governance model and structures like the Regionalverband Ruhr (RVR).

2. **Build local leadership capacity:**

   a. Develop leadership academies and training programs tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities in postindustrial regions. These programs should focus on practical skills such as coalition-building, public engagement, current local governance structures, and participatory governance, such as the program run by the Jefferson Educational Society's Civic Leadership Academy (JCLA).
   b. Partner with unions and corporations to integrate civic education into vocational training. Programs could include workshops on local governance, democracy building, and community organizing, ensuring that apprentices and trainees gain both technical and civic competencies.

3. **Foster community buy-in and participation:**

   a. Support grassroots initiatives that prioritize authentic community involvement in decision-making processes. This includes participatory practices such as community forums, town halls, and citizen advisory councils.
   b. Empower Betriebsräte (workplace councils) to ensure workers have a voice in company decisions, promoting workplace democracy and social dialogue.
   c. Build a bridge between local decision-makers and young people through youth councils designed to address local challenges.
   d. Support accessible funding mechanisms: introduce microfunds and funding opportunities for grassroots initiatives and political education, inspired by Germany's "Demokratie Leben!" program.

4. **Leverage regional networks:**

   a. Strengthen connections between metropolitan hubs and surrounding areas to share resources, strategies, and innovations.
   b. Promote cross-regional exchanges, including established models such as sister cities, to enable leaders in the industrial heartlands to learn from successes in similar regions across the country.

04.

MOBILIZE PRIVATE AND PHILANTHROPIC INVESTMENTS FOR REGIONAL RESILIENCE

Policy focus: Strengthen the role of private and philanthropic capital in revitalizing the industrial heartlands, with a focus on housing, small businesses, nonprofits, cultural heritage, and conservation. In light of shifting federal funding dynamics, this strategy emphasizes the necessity of mobilizing private and philanthropic capital to meet regional needs and ensure long-term community resilience.

Rationale: Industrial heartlands, rich in history and community identity, possess the tools and potential for success regardless of political transitions in major capitals. While federal programs such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the Inflation Reduction Act, and the American Rescue Plan Act have provided significant resources in recent years, the impending reduction in federal capital—coupled with growing skepticism toward European Union funding—signals a critical need for new funding mechanisms. The withdrawal of these sources requires the industrial heartlands to embrace a new approach: engaging with private and philanthropic sectors to secure the capital necessary for continued development and innovation. This is not to free the federal government from its responsibility to protect its people and communities, but instead to fill the gaps with existing resources when necessary.

Philanthropies and private entities must recognize their expanded role in community empowerment, moving beyond traditional "feel-good" investments to drive tangible, long-term outcomes. Community-driven initiatives across housing, small businesses, nonprofits, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental conservation can no longer depend on sporadic governmental support. Instead, the future of industrial heartland revitalization lies in creative capital stacks, involving a mix of private, philanthropic, and community funds. Tools such as program-related investments (PRIs) and social impact bonds can be used to strategically align private and philanthropic capital with community needs, ensuring projects are not only funded but also sustainable and impactful.

This model of collaboration strengthens democracy by ensuring that local communities—rather than distant authorities—play a central role in determining their destinies. A prime example of this is Erie Insurance's substantial investment in the downtown area of Erie, PA; this investment encompassed placemaking, small business support, and housing development. By partnering with local entities, Erie Insurance was able to integrate private capital into community-driven projects, demonstrating how the private sector can be a powerful partner in regional revitalization.

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Implementation:

1. **Engage private capital for regional growth:**

   a. Encourage private firms to expand their role in regional development by investing in projects that support housing, small businesses, and local infrastructure. Companies should partner with local organizations to address pressing community needs while fostering a sustainable economic environment.
   b. Support mixed-use projects that incorporate business development, housing, and cultural spaces to drive holistic community revitalization.

2. **Mobilize philanthropic capital for community empowerment:**

   a. Shift philanthropic investments from short-term, "feel-good" projects to long-term community empowerment strategies. Foundations and charitable organizations must self-identify as catalysts for industrial heartland systemic change to equip their communities and address challenges independently.
   b. Support a broader range of initiatives, from local nonprofits to cultural preservation and environmental conservation efforts, that align with community-driven priorities.
   c. Partner with local stakeholders to ensure philanthropic investments are impactful and relevant to community needs.
   d. Leverage business-led initiatives, such as Germany's Business Council for Democracy (BC4D), to combat hate speech, misinformation, and conspiracy theories, reinforcing democratic values in workplaces.

3. **Develop flexible and collaborative capital stacks:**

   a. Promote innovative financing models that combine private and philanthropic capital with limited government support, creating diversified capital stacks. These models can reduce dependence on government funding and mitigate financial risks.
   b. Encourage cross-sector partnerships between local governments, private investors, philanthropic organizations, and community groups to share risks and maximize impact.

05.

INVESTING IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PLACE

Policy focus: Integrate economic development with investments in housing, beautification, recreation, infrastructure, and community well-being to create vibrant, resilient, and attractive regions.

Rationale: Sustainable economic growth cannot exist in a vacuum—it requires parallel investments in quality-of-life elements such as housing, transportation, public spaces, healthcare, and core infrastructure. Without these foundational supports, economic gains fail to reach all residents, limiting long-term stability and reducing local retention of workers of all types. These components are critical to ensuring that economic gains benefit all residents and contribute to long-term stability.

Too often, economic strategies in the industrial heartlands focus only on attracting new industries without addressing the physical and social foundations that make communities desirable and competitive. True revitalization must be place-based, strengthening local assets, public spaces, and civic engagement to ensure growth is both lasting and widely shared.

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In the United States and Germany, these communities are not starting from zero—they hold competitive advantages in their built environment, architectural heritage, and access to renewable resources. These assets should not be treated as burdens of the past but as pillars of future economic success. Industrial heartlands, particularly around the U.S. Great Lakes, can leverage water access to attract industries in clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and climate-resilient development—positioning them not just for recovery but also for leadership in emerging industries.

To fully capitalize on these advantages, public–private partnerships must play a central role. Successful models, such as federally designated Opportunity Zones and place-based investment initiatives in Erie, PA, highlight how targeted funding can be used to restore local economies while maintaining community identity and affordability.

Implementation:

1. **Integrate economic development and quality-of-life investments:** Generate integrated economic development and quality-of-life strategies that connect investments in industrial and workforce development with investments in housing, infrastructure, and education. Early successes in advanced manufacturing and clean energy highlight the potential for these industrial heartland regions to become leaders in emerging industries.

2. **Leverage local and regional assets for competitive advantage:**

   a. Utilize natural resources, skilled labor, and historic infrastructure to attract clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and sustainable water-based industries.
   b. Encourage climate-conscious development, particularly around the U.S. Great Lakes, where water access provides a unique advantage in attracting industries with sustainability mandates.

3. **Foster public–private partnerships for transformative development:**

   a. Leverage local and regional capital for transformative projects. With private investment playing an increasingly important role in development, cities must become adept at assembling diverse funding sources. Coordinating public, private, and philanthropic capital unlocks resources for place-based transformative projects in housing, infrastructure, and commercial revitalization, especially if that capital is local.
   b. Expand programs such as Opportunity Zones and state-level place-based investment funds to drive targeted revitalization and meet local needs.

06.

CENTERING TRADE POLICY ON THE UNDERSERVED WORKER

Policy focus: Ensure that trade policy prioritizes the economic security of workers in the industrial heartlands, particularly minority communities historically embedded in these industries. This can be achieved by strengthening labor protections, enforcing fair labor standards in trade agreements, supporting targeted and precise duties on artificially undervalued foreign goods, and expanding Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) to retrain displaced workers for emerging industries in these regions.

Rationale: The Great Migration and the Bracero program shaped the U.S. industrial heartlands, as Black and Mexican workers moved to northern cities to build America's key manufacturing and agricultural industries. Similarly, Germany's post-World-War-II key industry expansion relied on Turkish Gastarbeiter (guest workers). With the passage of time, these ethnic-minority populations became disproportionately represented and generationally embedded in these sectors in the current industrial heartlands, yet globalization and national trade policies continue to have major impacts on both these metropolitan regions and individuals.

Rather than protectionism being the solution to deindustrialization, a progressive trade agenda should be pursued that upholds fair wages, prevents offshoring, bolsters international supply chains, and enforces labor protections as recommended by strategies such as ally-shoring. Fair competition can be supported by well-measured, targeted, and precise interventions such as restrained application of countervailing duties or anti-dumping duties on undervalued imports—only after thorough review and as necessity demands. Additionally, trade agreements must strengthen global labor rights, reducing corporate incentives to offshore jobs.

Trade policy must also promote democratic participation. Workers and unions should continue to have a voice in shaping trade agreements to restore trust. Clear communication, fair distribution of economic gains, and innovation in green industries can ensure manufacturing competitiveness while sustaining worker protections and democratic engagement.

Addressing potential conflicts of interest in trade deals and clearly communicating associated risks will empower communities to engage in economic policy and support a more resilient industrial base. Strengthening the worker's position within the economy is vital for sustaining trust in institutions, restoring public confidence in the government's ability to deliver economic security.

Rather than protectionism being the solution to deindustrialization, a progressive trade agenda should be pursued that upholds fair wages, prevents offshoring, bolsters international supply chains, and enforces labor protections as recommended by strategies such as ally-shoring.

Implementation:

1. **Strengthen enforcement of countervailing duties and anti-dumping duties:** Ensure fair competition between U.S., German, and foreign goods so that goods that benefit from artificially suppressed wages or state subsidies face appropriate tariffs to prevent unfair competition between American-made products and artificially devalued imports from undercutting domestic industries.

2. **Disincentivize offshoring:** Implement tax and trade policies that encourage corporations to retain and expand domestic production rather than relocate to markets with weaker labor protections.

   a. Example opportunities include onshoring tax credits, reshoring incentives, and establishing industrial heartland trade zones in both the United States and Germany to rebuild regional supply chains.
   b. Additional tax penalties should be levied on corporations that relocate production to exploit lower labor and environmental standards. An integral aspect of this also includes advocating for agreements that require partner nations to uphold fair wages, union rights, and workplace protections, including supports such as childcare that enable broader workforce participation.

3. **Develop targeted trade and industrial policies:** Policies should support critical domestic industries, including green steel, advanced robotics, and high-tech engineering, to safeguard regional manufacturing capacities and mitigate negative trade impacts.

4. **Expand and modernize Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) and German social protections:** Increase funding and tailor programs to help displaced workers transition into high-growth industries such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and technology.

CONCLUSION

The industrial heartlands stand at a crossroads. By unlocking the full potential of these regions, we can create pathways to prosperity, justice, and resilience. The heartlands are not just regions of the past but places poised to lead the way into a more democratic, sustainable future.

At the core of this transformation lies the power to unlock local leadership, foster regional collaboration, and provide the necessary tools for economic and social renewal. Through these policies, we aim to break through the structural barriers that have held back progress, unlocking the potential of every community to shape its future. By focusing on investment in people, place, and democratic processes, we can create vibrant, engaged communities that are resilient in the face of change and capable of guiding their own destinies.

The heartlands' legacy of industrial might can be the foundation for a new era—one in which these regions continue to unlock opportunities, create jobs, and strengthen the democratic fabric that binds us all. With the right investments and a commitment to local empowerment, the industrial heartlands will continue to serve as engines of innovation, shaping the future of both the United States and Germany.

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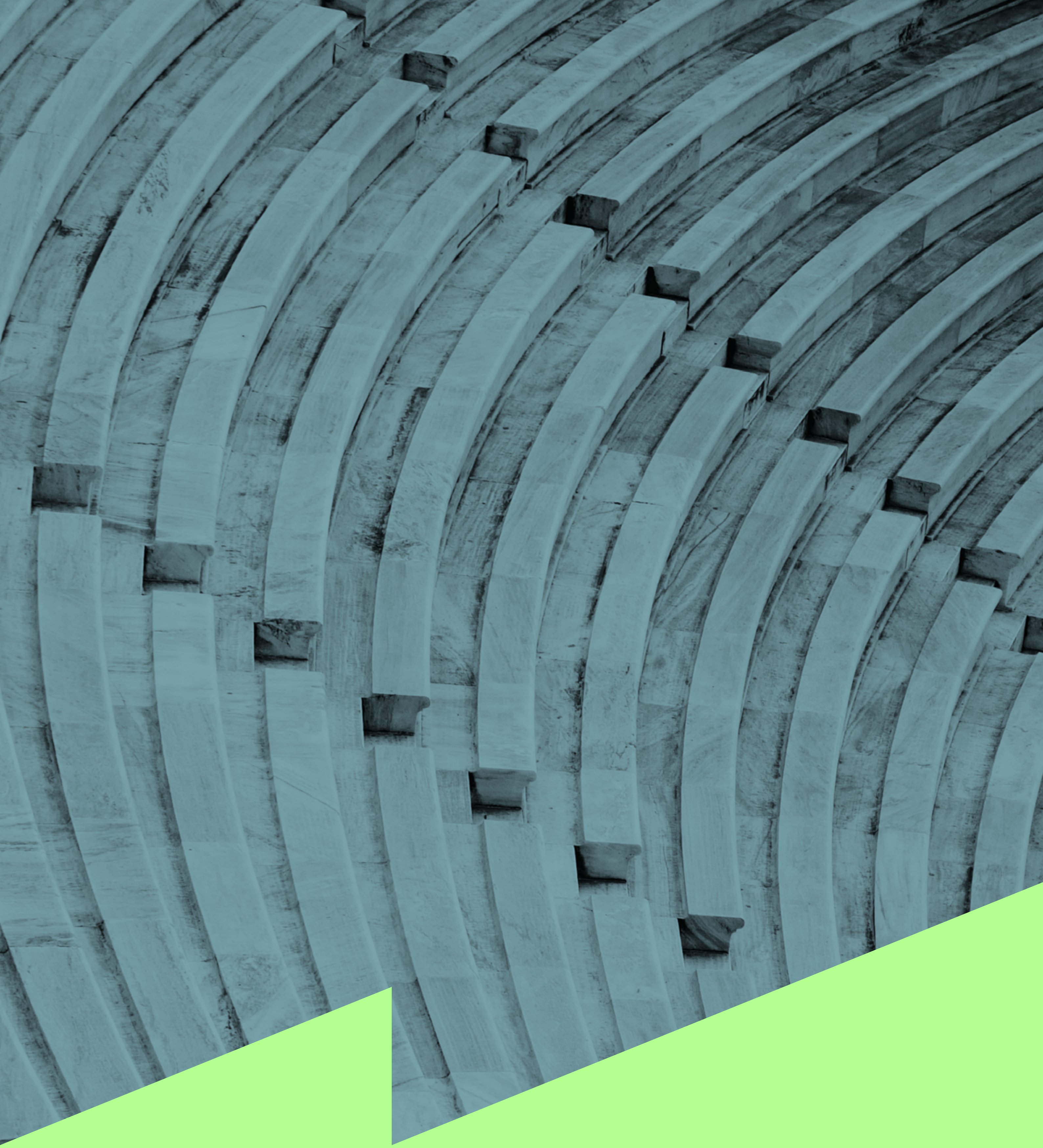

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