

Left behind?

Formations of crisis and community in deindustrialised South Wales

Residents of deindustrialised communities in South Wales value their hometowns and industrial past in ways that profoundly shape their identities. Their loyalty to these areas is strong, often choosing to stay despite dwindling opportunities. Amidst the socio-economic challenges of industry closures, Brexit, and the cost-of-living crisis, these communities face heightened struggles impacting their well-being and complicating already precarious situations.



Fig.1: The town Port Talbot and Tata Steel in the background: The steelworks remain central to the community. However, Tata's plans to shut down both blast furnaces in 2024 will result in officially 2,800 job losses (with actual numbers likely being higher), significantly impacting the local economy and livelihoods. (Image: Viktor Mácha/viktormacha.com)

Introduction

Deindustrialised communities, particularly in South Wales, have experienced profound socio-economic transformations over recent decades due to the decline of traditional industries.¹ The impacts of industry closures, Brexit and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis have further exacerbated these challenges, leading to heightened unemployment, social fragmentation, and economic instability.²

A contemporary community study

This study explores the functions and meanings attributed to the concept of 'community' amid multiple crises. It investigates the issues faced by residents and their social environment, with special attention to how these developments are narrated and understood. By examining personal stories and community interactions, the research seeks to uncover the resilience and adaptability of these communities. Additionally, it highlights the importance of local support systems and collective efforts in fostering a sense of belonging and stability.



Fig.2: The industrial past is deeply embedded in these communities. (Image: Olivia Frigo-Charles)

Methods

Ethnographic methods: Participant observation to immerse in community life.

Qualitative interviews: In-depth discussions with residents, local leaders, and organisation representatives.

Focus group discussions: Collaborative dialogues to capture diverse perspectives.

Validation of results: Participant feedback to ensure accuracy and relevance.

Design Thinking Workshop: Engaging residents to co-develop policy recommendations and envision future community narratives.

Monograph, short documentary film, and presentation in the community planned

Field insights

„Welsh coal is the best coal ever'. That's what they say and I think people still are proud of the fact that it is the highest quality of coal in the world. The same may be said for steel nowadays. We are proud of what we do and we often do a bloody good job. I suppose it's intrinsic with the families here. Lots of people used to say 'You're from a poor area'. The only way that's correct is in cash value. In every other sense I've never known such a rich place. I'm in a fortunate situation where money isn't the be all and end all. I've never been able to say, money isn't a problem, but I've been able to rely on friends and neighbours.“ (local resident)

„The Tory government, Welsh Assembly, and Tata Steel claim there's 100-140 million to help communities and businesses affected by the steelworks changes. Similar promises were made to Ebbw Vale and Valleys communities when the mines closed, promising help and alternative employment. Decades later, we're in the same position. Until we see actual progress and new businesses, it's hard to believe these promises, as we've heard them for decades without seeing results.“ (Tata Steel employee)

„When you drive through different villages, the infrastructure is neglected, and buildings look tired and unloved. This affects people's health and well-being, as seeing their home in disrepair is demoralising. Improvements elsewhere show the positive impact that could be felt here too.“ (local resident)

Preliminary results

- Strong working-class identity shapes community values and responses to crises.
- Residents express a sense of abandonment by broader political and economic systems.
- Industry cuts, such as those by Tata, have devastating effects on communities. Increased fears of rising mental health issues and domestic violence.
- Communities oppose neoliberal shift and advocate for more community-centered approaches.
- Residents often hesitate to pursue ambitions due to fear of failure and lack of safety nets, leading to a sense of complacency despite hard work.
- Critical support is provided by the Salvation Army, food banks, churches, and grassroots initiatives.
- Informal support networks within the community also play a crucial role.
- Urgent need for targeted social work, particularly in youth engagement and mental health support.

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