

POLICY BRIEF

Challenging the Concept of **Left-behindness:**

Drivers and Perception of Territorial
Inequalities and their Policy Responses

EXIT

Exploring Sustainable
Strategies to Counteract
Territorial Inequalities from
an Intersectional Approach



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EXIT IN SHORT:

The EXIT project aims to provide an in-depth analysis of ‘left-behindness’ as a concept often used for characterizing territorial inequalities faced by certain areas. Grounded on this, EXIT seeks to identify strategies to address it. This means building knowledge on drivers of inequalities in and between areas that are referred to as ‘left-behind’ and on drivers of perceptions of these areas as ‘left-behind’.

The EXIT analyses are guided by seven themes forming the overarching framework of EXIT. The project - involving seven universities and four civil society organizations from eight countries – will propose ways to tackle such inequalities through a rigorous programme of cross-disciplinary and multi-actor research with communities on the ground.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EXIT project critically examines the concept of “left-behindness” and its role in characterizing territorial inequalities in Europe. The project aims to identify the drivers of these inequalities and propose strategies to address them by integrating insights from both local and broader perspectives. It challenges the focus on protest voting and emphasizes understanding the root causes of inequality across seven key analytical dimensions: social services, education, employment, community, housing, mobility, and digital inclusiveness.

Key Findings:

1. **Complex Nature of Territorial Inequalities:** Territorial inequalities stem from a combination of economic stagnation, lack of cohesion, and political neglect. These inequalities are often mischaracterized in public discourse, particularly when focusing solely on low-growth areas.
2. **Diverse National Contexts:** The concept of “left-behind areas” varies significantly across different European countries. While the term is prevalent in the UK, other nations describe similar phenomena with terms that reflect their unique historical and social contexts, such as “remote areas” in Austria and “emptied Spain” in Spain.
3. **Drivers of Inequality:** Nine key drivers of territorial inequality were identified, including inadequate policy frameworks, fragmented governance, poor inter-agency collaboration, insufficient local funding, demographic changes, and geographical challenges.
4. **Policy Implications:** To effectively address these inequalities, a comprehensive policy framework is needed, emphasizing vertical policy coordination, inter-agency collaboration, and balanced approaches between centralized and decentralized governance. Additionally, local funding systems should be reformed to address specific local challenges, and institutional capacities must be strengthened.
5. **Heterogeneity within “Left-Behind Areas”:** There is a wide range of inequalities even within areas labeled as “left-behind,” including rural, post-industrial, and urban regions. Urban areas, particularly those with high migrant and minority populations, face unique challenges that are often overlooked in national discussions.
6. **Spatial Justice and Local Development:** The study advocates for an intersectional approach to address the lived experiences of people in “left-behind” areas, focusing on spatial justice and grassroots development solutions. It also emphasizes the importance of local data in shaping effective policies.

Conclusion:

The EXIT project highlights the need to move beyond simplistic narratives of “left-behind” areas and adopt nuanced, locally-informed policy approaches to address territorial inequalities in Europe. This requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts at multiple governance levels, with a strong emphasis on local context and the lived experiences of residents.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE ON TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES

For many years, discussions on territorial inequality and- cohesion in the EU have been dominated by a debate on whether to focus on lack of growth or lack of cohesion (ESPON 2007; Barca 2009). Over time, there has been a greater emphasis on integrating these two perspectives (e.g., Böhme et al 2011) and in a way that at the same time acknowledges that these processes “[...] are located in concrete place, interact with neighbours, generate flows of goods, people and ideas, support concentration, economies of scale and scope (or de-concentration, diseconomies)” (Böhme et al. 2011:21). For a policy to be successful, it needs to be informed -involve and be owned - by the local community. When it comes to the specific debate on low-growth areas, the general integrative and very local perspective seems to be ignored in favor of a focus on low growth versus low income (Widuto, 2019), as well as a focus on political instability and protest voting (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Kölling, 2021; Chilvers et al. 2024).

To enhance our understanding of the factors driving territorial inequalities and perceptions of left-behind areas, EXIT focuses on growth, income, and cohesion across various European scales. This examination is guided by seven analytical dimensions: 1. Social services and health, 2. Formal and informal education, 3. Employment and professional life, 4. Community 5. Housing, environment and regeneration, 6. Mobility and immobility, 7. Digital inclusiveness

The different analytical dimensions function differently across countries and scales. The context in which these indicators are applied significantly influences the outcomes, which can sometimes even be contradictory when applied at various scales.

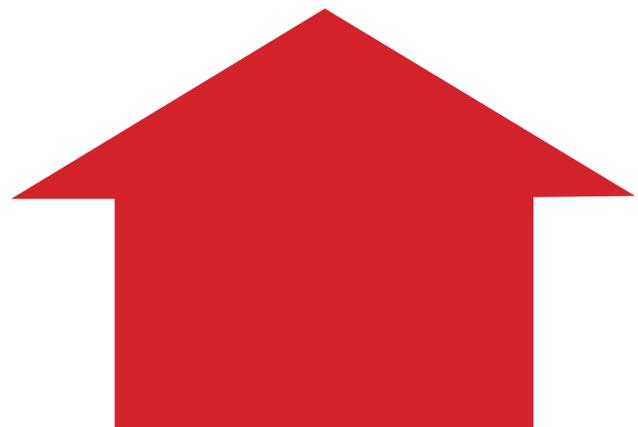
Thus, the EXIT research combines an ‘outside’ view, focusing on forms, actors, aims, and organization (typically seen from a policymaker’s perspective), with an ‘inside’ view, looking at methods, strategies, and ways of thinking and acting (usually associated with local actors). In this way the research process recognizes the fact that places are different in many respects and therefore should be met differently politically.

This brief aims to spark a discussion on the factors driving inequalities in areas labeled as “left behind.” It emphasizes the importance of focusing on drivers of inequality rather than solely on the “protest voting” of local populations. Concepts like “left-behind places” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020) and “places that don’t matter” (Kölling, 2021) highlight the economic stagnation and political neglect in certain areas of the Global North. These terms have been interpreted in various ways across different fields of research, public debates, and policies, but their meaning remains elusive. We need to understand these places in light of both lack of growth and lack of cohesion and we also need to understand how these concrete locations, interact with neighbors, generate flows of goods, people, and ideas, and support concentration, economies of scale and scope (or de-concentration and diseconomies).

In short, we need to understand the complexity of such places.

EXIT explores and expands the discourse on “left-behind places” both through an innovative empirical approach and through a critical examination of the concept itself.

“The policy brief asks:
**what are the key drivers of
inequalities in areas that
are characterized as left
behind and what drives
perceptions of these areas
as “left-behind”?**”



THE CONCEPT “LEFT-BEHIND AREAS”

While widely used in Anglophone academic and policy discourse, in other contexts “left-behind areas” is more of a placeholder for different forms of territorial inequalities. It is a rather vague concept used to describe economically struggling, rural or post-industrial areas inhabited by an older, white working class. The recent focus on these areas is largely attributed to the ‘protest vote’ of their local populations.

Binaries between prosperous metropolitan areas and rural “left-behind places” should be avoided, as they hide the rampant territorial inequalities in (sub)urban areas, which strongly affect minority populations. It also obscures the local heterogeneity of areas labeled as “left-behind”.

EXIT highlights the need to focus on the factors that contribute to territorial inequality, not on protest voting.

Instead of using terms that may reproduce stigmatization, concepts that emphasize local potential should be strengthened.

EXIT understand ‘left behindness’ as a form of territorial inequality that emerges as a dialectic relationship between a peripheral experience in concrete locations on the one hand and political discourses as well as the place-specific employment of indicators and policy instruments on the other.”

THE NATIONAL CONTEXTS

The research across eight countries has clearly shown a wide variety of concepts used to describe certain areas as marginalized in the context of territorial inequalities. However, the term “left-behind” is not translated or used in any of the national contexts beyond the UK.

In **Greece**, structurally deprived areas have mainly been framed along the line of remoteness and isolation, as well as along economic factors.

Serbia has a narrative of underdeveloped regions, but also of “devastated” areas.

Austria has a framing of remote areas. The latter are usually characterised by their remoteness based on the mountainous topography or the proximity to the state borders in the east, which have formerly been at the hard border of the Iron Curtain.

Italy’s “inner areas” are defined as those situated at a relevant distance from providers of essential services, (such as mobility, health education and digitalisation).

Spain’s narrative of the “emptied” Spain also evokes the image of depopulated and uninhabited inner land.

Denmark has a particularly strong and derogative dispositive, “the Rotten Banana”, which describes certain rural areas that run along the country in the shape of the fruit.

Belgium’s notion of territorial inequality appears less developed, but runs along conflict lines between the regions, with a strong stereotyping of “poor” post-industrial Wallonia.

UK dispositive of “left-behind places” frames mainly former industrial areas with a white working-class population that now finds itself unemployed.

While some of these dispositives use more descriptive and less derogative categorisations, all these framings still evoke images of places and people lacking something.

In Italy “inner areas” is an institutional dispositive, rather than a counter-narrative. The concept is derived from the National Strategy for Inner Areas, a national policy designed to create a shared understanding of marginality and territorial inequalities, and to implement measures to counteract these conditions. However, other counternarratives exist. In Denmark, its rural areas are viewed positively for their strong community cohesion and participation. Other countries also have conflicting national images and discourses that don’t align with the general idea of “left-behind” territories. Former industrial areas in Spain and Austria are acknowledged but lack adequate measures to address inequality. In Belgium, rural areas are less present in the “left-behind” discourse dominated by industrial decline in Wallonia and deprived areas in big cities, possibly due to high population density, suburbanization, and commuter culture. Additionally, concepts like “sacrifice zones” in Italy and “new extractivism” in Spain highlight the negative impacts of top-down development policies on the environment, natural resources, and local populations. An overview of the national discourses shows that the concentration of poverty in urban areas is generally treated in a different policy framework and with different terminology than other typologies of “left-behind”-territories.



“LEFT BEHIND AREAS” - AFFECTED BY DIFFERENT LEVELS OF GOVERNANCE

The EXIT working definition understands “left-behindness” as a form of territorial inequality emerging from the dialectic relationship between peripheral experiences in specific locations and political discourses, along with the place-specific use of indicators and policy instruments.

EXIT’s heuristic model seeks to connect local experiences and perceptions of “being left-behind” with broader discussions of territorial inequality at both EU and national levels. By employing an intersectional approach to examine the lived experiences of people and considering various factors of marginalization, this model provides policymakers with a comprehensive tool to address and mitigate these inequalities.



An intersectional approach is needed to address the concrete lived experiences of people according to the intersection of different factors of marginalization.



Focus on spatial justice and local grassroots development solutions.



Consider more strongly the concrete experiences of residents and see them as agents, rather than stigmatize them as problematic ‘protest voters’.

THE HETEROGENEITY OF “LEFT-BEHIND AREAS”

EXIT has identified three typologies that indicate high levels of territorial inequality:

Rural

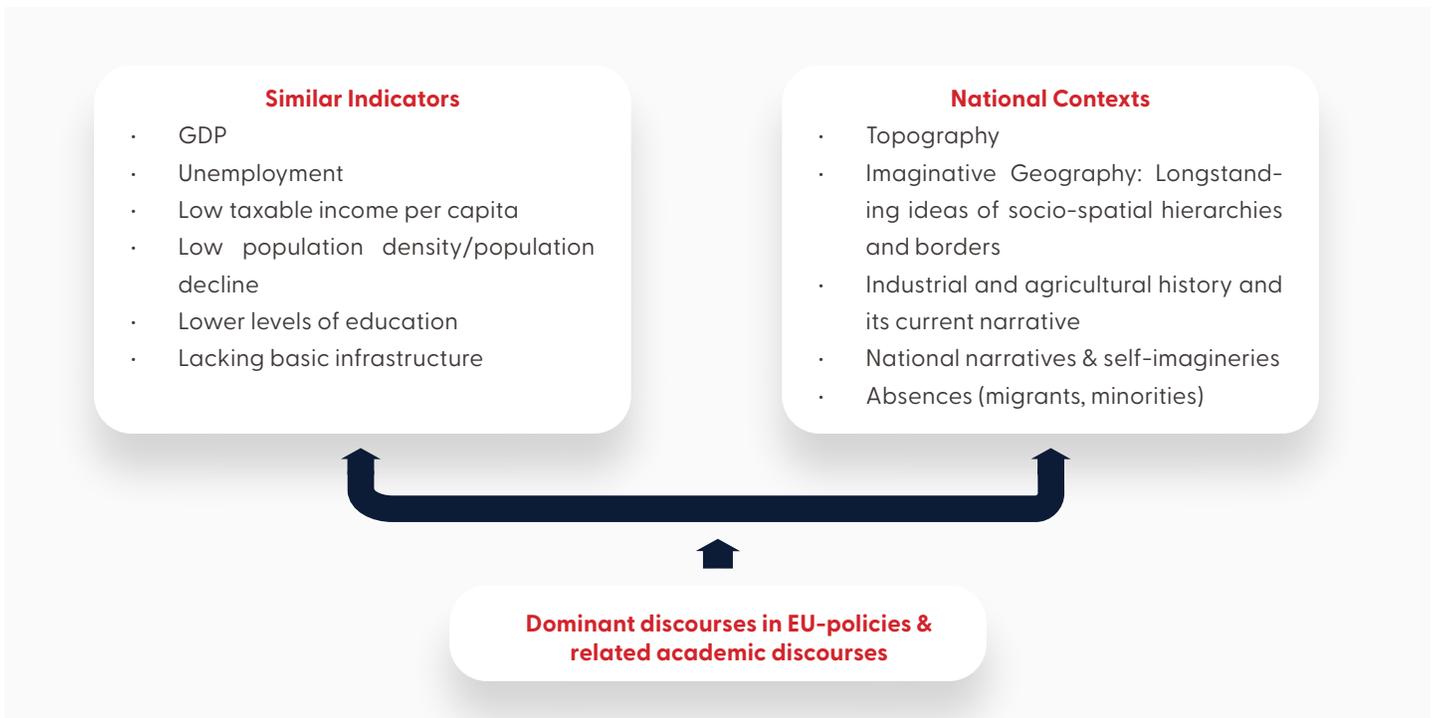
post-industrial

urban “left-behind places”

In each national context, two municipalities are selected based on common typologies most relevant to each country. These case studies are chosen using indicators that demonstrate a real concentration of poverty and a high relevance to the seven guiding themes of the EXIT study.

- It is important to consider territorial inequalities within different areas as well as the heterogeneity within them.
- In urban areas migrants and minority populations are affected disproportionately by territorial inequality, a fact that might be hidden when focusing solely on postindustrial or rural areas.

Despite the differences in each of the eight national contexts there are similar typologies with regards to the variety and types of places addressed:



POLICY ENVIRONMENTS OF TERRITORIAL **INEQUALITY**

Countries implement complex strategies and policies to tackle territorial inequality, often within regional development frameworks. There is a clear focus on an integrated development approach that involves multiple stakeholders. Policies aimed at promoting business and employment, addressing rural areas, and ensuring fiscal equalization have been especially emphasized. These strategies and policies are closely aligned with European policies, notably the cohesion policy. However, funding allocation and the adoption of a place-based approach vary significantly among countries.

Decentralized Growth Strategy:

This approach includes providing incentives for businesses to establish operations in Left-Behind Areas, improving infrastructure, and expanding access to education and workforce development initiatives.

Addressing the Well-being of Inhabitants in Left-Behind Areas:

Ensuring well-being and access to essential services, regardless of development level, suggests incorporating policies such as fiscal equalization into strategic documents addressing territorial disparities.

Evaluation of Strategies and Policies for Left-Behind Areas:

Research on the effectiveness of these strategies is limited, with many policies remaining unevaluated.

Evaluation of Spatially-Blind Policies:

It's crucial to assess the impact of various national policies on Left Behind Areas, as they may be less effective in these areas due to design, implementation, or non-take-up issues.

Multi-level Coordination and Capacity Building:

Strengthening coordination among different levels of governance and enhancing the capacity of local authorities are crucial steps toward mitigating territorial inequalities and fostering progress.

KEY DRIVERS OF TERRITORIAL INEQUALITY

EXIT has identified 9 key drivers of territorial inequality across national contexts based on national surveys and focus groups involving local, regional, national and EU stakeholders (authorities, institutions, civil society organizations, and others).

The key drivers of territorial inequality:

1

The absence of a comprehensive policy framework, coupled with short-term perspectives in policy implementation, contributes to the ongoing existence of territorial inequalities.

3

Weak inter-agency collaboration contribute to territorial inequalities and challenges, which has led to calls in some countries for a thorough review of the management of territorial inequalities and the enhancement of coordination.

2

Fragmented competences and vertical policy coordination gaps between different levels of government obstruct comprehensive regional development in countries.

4

Inadequate funding systems at the local level can either create or perpetuate territorial inequalities, as unfair distribution, bureaucratic obstacles, and neglect of rural areas amplify these disparities, emphasizing the need for targeted funding strategies that address local needs and challenges.

5

Population decline and shifts in demographic structure across multiple countries necessitate an evolving role for the state, as phenomena like brain drain, diminishing birth rates, and migration affect municipal economic capacity and essential service provision.

6

Countries need to find a balanced approach between centralized and decentralized policies to effectively address territorial inequalities, as extremes in either approach risk fostering disparities—with centralization leading to neglect and uneven resource distribution, and decentralization resulting in disparities in service delivery and economic development.

7

Insufficient institutional capacities to effectively address the issue of territorial inequality pose a major obstacle defining or implementing measures addressing territorial inequalities.

8

Topography and geographical positioning can significantly shape the quality of life in various regions, stemming from historical factors like the south-north divide or challenging terrains such as remote mountains, islands, and border areas, impacting accessibility, infrastructure development, economic opportunities, and demographic composition.

9

The distribution of EU funds can deepen territorial inequalities in various countries, mainly in border regions, thus leading to distortions in competition.

To address challenges identified through policy drivers:

- **Establish a Comprehensive Policy Framework:** Develop and implement a long-term, comprehensive policy framework that addresses territorial inequalities, incorporating both short-term and long-term perspectives to ensure sustainable development.
- **Enhance Vertical Policy Coordination:** Improve coordination and cooperation between different levels of government to ensure comprehensive regional development, bridging fragmented competences and addressing gaps in policy coordination.
- **Strengthen Inter-Agency Collaboration:** Foster stronger collaboration and horizontal cooperation among relevant agencies and stakeholders to address territorial inequalities effectively. This includes conducting thorough reviews of current management practices and enhancing coordination mechanisms.
- **Reform Local Funding Systems:** Revise local funding systems to ensure fair distribution and eliminate bureaucratic obstacles, especially in rural areas. Implement targeted funding strategies that address local needs and challenges to reduce disparities.
- **Address Population Decline and Demographic Shifts:** Develop adaptive policies to address population decline and demographic shifts, including measures to mitigate brain drain, promote sustainable birth rates, and manage migration effectively to support municipal economic capacity and essential service provision.
- **Balance Centralized and Decentralized Policies:** Adopt a balanced approach between centralized and decentralized policies to mitigate territorial inequalities. Avoid extremes in either approach to prevent neglect or uneven resource distribution, ensuring equitable service delivery and economic development.
- **Build Institutional Capacities:** Invest in building institutional capacities to effectively address territorial inequalities. Provide training and resources to enable institutions to define and implement measures targeting territorial inequality effectively.
- **Address Geographical Challenges:** Develop targeted policies and investments to address geographical challenges that impact quality of life in various regions. This includes addressing historical factors like north-south divides and addressing infrastructural needs in remote or challenging terrains.
- **Mitigate EU Funding Distortions:** Implement measures to mitigate the potential deepening of territorial inequalities resulting from EU fund allocation, particularly in border regions. Ensure fair competition and prevent distortions through targeted interventions and policy adjustments.

FACTORS, DRIVERS AND PERCEPTIONS RELATED TO THE **ANALYTICAL** **DIMENSIONS**

- **Social services and health:** Social and healthcare policies contribute to territorial inequalities in various countries, manifesting through shortages of medical professionals, a decline in health services due to depopulation, challenges accessing social services and healthcare in remote areas, emphasizing the necessity for coordinated efforts to address these inequalities. “The councillor’s role [in municipality] lacks a comprehensive perspective on social policy, which encompasses more than just social services.” (WP2-IT-FG2-P5)
- **Formal and informal education:** Education challenges emerge as a significant driver of territorial inequalities in many countries, with distinct issues including limited housing and services for students and employees, social diversity problems in schools, overcrowding in specific regions, centralization leading to an exodus of young people from rural areas, low education rates, high school drop-out rates, and staff shortages in isolated areas, among others. “If a student wishes to attend high school, they may face difficulties in accessing it if there is no direct public transport available.” (WP2-IT-FG4-P2)
- **Employment and professional life:** Labor policies are the primary driver of territorial inequalities in some countries, with the issues like scarcity of academic and service-oriented jobs in rural areas, high unemployment rates, shifts in industry development, mobility patterns leading to a drain of specialist knowledge, and the impact of tourism on job opportunities in left-behind regions. “If you studied in the village, you would move to Vienna. Normally, [...] And then, of course, the specialist knowledge gets sucked up from the regions, where it would be also very much needed.” (WP2-AT-FG2-P1)
- **Community and social life:** Community and social life in some countries are shaped by various phenomena such as migration, social differentiation, declining activism, or weakened community ties can increase territori-

al inequalities. For them it looks relevant that among the guiding themes, the one involving community and social life seems to be the most invisible from the perspective of the policy framework and emerges only implicitly among the 9 drivers of inequality. In other countries, the local community is the most valuable and is referred to by residents and stakeholders as being much stronger than in urban areas. In both cases it applies that: “Community and local social life are very sensitive to negative territorial articulations” (WP2-DK-FG3)

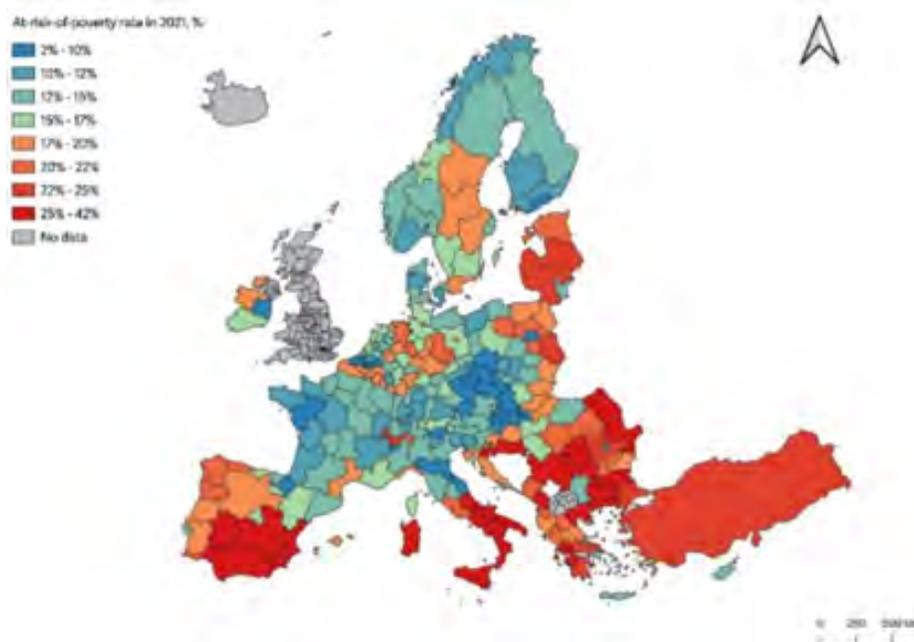
- **Housing, environment, and regeneration:** Housing affordability and access are critical issues identified as drivers of territorial inequality in several countries, which are fueled by factors such as land speculation, second-home development, uncontrolled residential expansion, and industrial activity. In rural areas, there is often a lack of alternatives to single-family homes, which are not affordable for many residents. “Quality of life is not solely determined by having a job and a salary. People also aspire to reside in a healthy environment, and if these conditions are not met, they may choose to relocate, similar to their considerations for employment.” (WP2-RS-FG4-P1)
- **Mobility and immobility:** Mobility challenges, arising from inadequate transportation infrastructure and traffic congestion can be the key factors contributing to territorial inequality, underscoring the complex relationship between infrastructure, mobility, and regional disparities. “you see the bus stop there? If you are lucky you will get a bus in an hour to just get to the center of the town” (WP2-UK-FG2-P3)
- **Digital inclusiveness:** Digital infrastructure plays a vital role in strengthening the competitiveness of remote regions, with various countries emphasizing initiatives such as improving internet connectivity, creating co-working spaces, and optimizing digital resources in public administration to tackle territorial inequalities and foster digital inclusiveness. Digital inclusiveness ensures that digital technologies are accessible and equitable for everyone, both individually and collectively. Public policies should support this inclusiveness. “At the time of the COVID crisis, the social services provided people with PCs and tablets, and we realised that for some people, they had taken the PC and tablet, but they had never been able to use them. It’s really more a question of use than access to the tool itself.” (BE-IV-SH3)

ASSESSING TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES AT THE **LOCAL LEVEL**

EXIT recognizes that socioeconomic strategies often act as reactive tools and defensive mechanisms people use to cope with difficult conditions. These strategies are usually shaped by local conditions and specific histories, making them hard to transfer from one place to another. This could be why such innovations often don't become mainstream. The project analyzes these innovations considering both local and shared factors, aiming to create a typology of characteristics to help policymakers target resources more effectively.

There are left-behind places within prosperous regions and left-behind regions with fast growing areas (cities usually). There are strong territorial disparities within regions that need to be addressed/analyzed with local data. Territorial inequalities can be observed in all the Guiding Themes. There are different typologies of left-behind areas, with different challenges and needs.

Place-based policies need to be based on evidence provided by local data. The availability of data at local level differs from one EU country to another. A joint effort to request, compile and homogenize local data should be made by the EU. Quantitative data sometimes do not capture relevant aspects related to the concept/perception of left-behindness.



Socioeconomic indicators collected or estimated at the local level need to be complemented with field work. The characterization of left-behind places needs data not only related to economic activity or growth, but also related to access to basic services such as education and health, employment, mobility, digital infrastructure, housing, the sense of community, etc. Some factors can be quantified, while others call for qualitative work.

As an innovative offspring of this problem, we have attempted to map territorial resources using Open Street Map. So far, we called it negative space mapping. Utilizing data from OpenStreetMap (OSM) API, Negative Space Mapping focuses on mapping amenities such as healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and recreational areas. The absence of these amenities, particularly in lower-socio-economic municipalities, is then used to identify negative spaces – areas devoid of essential services and infrastructure.

This method goes beyond mere identification; it quantifies the extent of spatial and social exclusion within municipalities, providing a more detailed understanding of inequality. Our analysis reveals that ‘left behind’ areas are not confined to urban or rural distinctions but exist across various municipality types within the EU. By converting amenities into polygon points of a set diameter, Negative Space Mapping visualizes the extent of service and amenity scarcity. This approach is particularly useful for policymakers and urban planners, providing a tool to better target interventions and resources in the areas most in need. The adaptability of this method to diverse geographical contexts makes it a valuable tool for comparative studies across EU municipalities. The findings of this study highlight the importance of nuanced and localized data in shaping effective and equitable urban development policies.



Examples of negative space mapping from Spain and Italy, similar maps are available for all case areas.

CONCLUSION

All countries have examples of the three types of left-behind areas that are the focus of EXIT, but there are important national variations:

Rural Areas: Most countries have strong narratives of rural “left-behindness”, characterized by population decline, economic stagnation, lower GDP, and higher unemployment. Accessibility is a major issue due to remoteness from transportation and production hubs, often near national borders or in mountainous areas, like in Serbia, Austria, and Greece.

Post Industrial Areas: Many countries mention former industrial areas as either separate from or part of rural “left-behind” areas. These are significant in EU policy but less so in national contexts, except for Italy and the UK.

Urban Areas: Most countries have narratives about segregated, neglected urban neighborhoods, often labeled “problem zones” and inhabited by poor, migrant, and minority populations. Despite being heavily affected by territorial inequality, these areas are often overlooked in national discussions on “left-behindness”.

Returning to the main question of this policy brief, EXIT identified 9 key-drivers of territorial inequality. National consultations show the multifaceted nature of territorial inequality and the need for comprehensive policy frameworks, effective coordination between different levels of government, and collaboration among various stakeholders to address the challenges.

Some of the main dimensions of the EXIT Project serve as key indicators across many countries, while others are less significant for territorial inequality it depends on the national context. Despite different national approaches, indicators of territorial inequality are similar, focusing on economic aspects like GDP, lower taxable income per capita, and higher unemployment rates. In rural areas, these criteria include low population density, population decline, and ageing populations, with young women leaving rural areas notably in Spain and Austria. Populist party votes are significant in some countries like Denmark and the UK but contested in others.

Urban, rural, and post-industrial areas face distinct challenges. Housing affordability affects all areas, with second homes and tourist accommodations raising prices for residents. Rural areas often lack affordable alternatives to single-family homes, facing vacancies and deteriorating housing conditions, which can lead to safety and health issues from abandoned buildings. Unchecked expansion or industrial activity threatens the environment and local quality of life.

Mobility is a key issue in rural areas highlighting transportation infrastructure and distance from metropolitan centers. Rural “left-behindness” focuses on mobility, while urban inequality often relates to education, migration, and minority issues. Poor public infrastructure and housing quality are recurring themes, especially in urban areas. Emerging environmental issues, such as “new extractivism” in Spain and “sacrifice zones” in Italy, are significant in some national narratives.

The localized aspects and perspectives of people living in these areas are largely absent from these discourses, aside from their portrayal as problematized protest voters. This absence highlights the need for an ethnographically informed approach that uses local everyday life as a starting point to apply an intersectional perspective on the construction of “left-behind” places and their material, everyday implications. Importantly, this approach should introduce new perspectives on those currently invisible in the discursive production of “left-behind places”.



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