EXIT

Exploring sustainable
strategies to counteract
territorial inequalities
from an intersectional
approach

Guidelines
on **uses** and **misconceptions**
of the **concept** **"left-behind"**

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These guidelines have been produced by the EXIT consortium in June 2023, with particular contributions by partners Technische Universität Wien, Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (ARCI), Social Action and Innovation Centre (KMOP) and Universitat de Barcelona.

Introduction:
"Left-behind" places and the EXIT research

The EXIT project, short for "Exploring Sustainable Strategies to Counteract Territorial Inequalities from an Intersectional Approach" is funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe Programme, and aims to analyse territorial inequalities from a place-based, intersectional and mixed-methods approach.

In recent academic discussions on territorial inequalities, the concept of "left-behind places" has gained considerable significance. This concept has been extensively explored in English-speaking scholarly debates, as evidenced by works such as those by Goodwin and Heath (2016), Wuthnow (2018), Rodriguez-Pose (2018), Dijkstra et al. (2020), and MacKinnon et al. (2022). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged in European Union policy documents (see e.g. European Commission 2017, 2021, 2022a, and 2022b). The use of this concept has particularly intensified since the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

The EXIT project aims to conduct multi-situated research to provide a comprehensive analysis of "left-behindness" as a concept used to characterize territorial inequalities experienced by specific areas. The research employs ethnographic and quantitative methods, along with policy analysis, to explore the perspectives and experiences of residents and other stakeholders in various selected areas across eight countries. Subsequently, the project will identify strategies and practices at different levels to tackle territorial inequalities. That is, the research will not only produce knowledge on the factors contributing to territorial inequalities, but also create an in-depth understanding of what shapes the perception of these areas as being "left-behind".

These guidelines

In the initial phase of the project, our research aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of how the concept of "left-behindness" is employed in research, policy, and political discourse to describe areas experiencing territorial inequality. Based on this understanding, we engaged with critical literature to situate the concept within a broader context. Additionally, we conducted a comparative analysis of the political,

academic, and public debates surrounding territories labelled as marginal or peripheral in eight specific European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain, and the UK. This analysis allowed us to identify six central uses and misconceptions related to the notion of "left-behind," which, in turn, led to six suggestions aimed at fostering complementary or alternative perspectives.

This document presents the guidelines on the uses and misconceptions associated with "left-behind" places, as part of the ongoing EXIT project. These guidelines constitute the first of three sets of guidelines to be developed within the project, specifically targeting media and online content creators, policy makers, and communities.

The present guidelines on the uses and misconceptions of the concept of "left-behind" places are specifically designed for media and content creators. They are based on the consortium's collective understanding of the concept.

The primary aims of these guidelines are to:

· Encourage a critical approach to understanding the concept of "left-behindness"

· Provide key messages and insights for further exploration

· Guide stakeholders in avoiding the overexposure and victimization of specific places and communities.

· Generate interest on the issue of territorial inequalities at large and offer tools to accurately frame the topic.

· Promote interest in the future results of the project

6 key messages on the concept "left-behind"

1 "Left-behind" is a vague concept:

"Left behind" is used to describe different issues: economically declining rural areas, post-industrial regions, or areas of discontent. A clear definition, conceptualization and theoretical elaboration is missing in the current debate. One of the core assumptions formulated in the literature on "left-behind places" is directly linked to populist electoral successes in the USA and the UK. "Left-behind places" are described to be economically struggling, rural areas, inhabited by mainly older, white working-class populations that have turned away from mainstream political parties. This has been explained by the assumption that these inhabitants feel "left-behind" by national and EU policies, which are perceived as having reinforced territorial polarisation. "Left-behind places" as a concept has subsequently found its way into the EU policy discourses and was incorporated into its strategies and policy papers. The term "left behind", however, is not used in any of the European national contexts researched in the project beyond the UK. Yet, there is a wide variety of concepts used to describe certain areas as marginalized in the context of territorial inequalities: "emptied" Spain, Italy's "inner areas", Denmark's "Rotten Banana", or "border areas" in Austria. However, these are not necessarily tied to protest vote. The term "left-behind" should rather be considered a placeholder for the very different forms of territorial inequalities and, if used, it should be properly defined and contextualised.

Focus on factors that contribute to territorial inequality, not on protest voting.

Negative Connotation / Stigmatisation:

Debates on "left-behind places" explicitly open up a binary between economically prospering areas and those that are not. Such ascription of "left-behindness" might (re)produce and (re)frame the subject position as a "left-behind person" living in a "left-behind place", leading to stigmatisation and devaluation. Even area-based policies in the EU are criticized for reproducing and enhancing territorial inequalities, also by the use of terms such as "left behind". The term "left-behind places" inevitably labels a required development and implicitly identifies places and residents that are not keeping up with this imagined form of development, devaluating other economic and social models and the inherent value of these areas.

Using the term "left-behind" might reproduce and reinforce territorial inequalities. The goal should be to use concepts that emphasize the local potential and not the shortcomings.

Binary opposition between left behind and metropolitan areas:

"Left behindness" is conceptualized in binary opposition to prosperous, growing, metropolitan areas. This masks the heterogeneity of local realities in "left-behind places" and also obscures the highly unequal spatial realities within cities, which often concerns migrant and/or minority populations. Despite the lack of attention to urban spaces in this discourse, the areas that are the most economically deprived, disadvantaged and segregated are often neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas.

It is important to consider territorial inequalities also within urban areas, which strongly affect migrants and minority populations, as well as the local heterogeneity of areas labelled as "left-behind".

Missing intersectional perspective:

"Left-behindness" is mostly used for areas characterized by populist vote and older, white, "traditional working class" populations. Ethnicity, race, and racism are hardly thematized in the literature although racism has been pictured as a key to understanding populist votes all across Europe. Moreover, marginalized realities remain invisible in cases in which economic precarity, precarious residency status, and racial discrimination intersect. The understanding of territorial inequalities might be re-conceptualised to refer to the most disadvantaged in looking at the localized intersectional relationship of race, gender, class, citizenship, and age.

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

Dominant orientation towards growth and competition:

The neoliberal growth paradigm that is the currently prevailing European policy approach to regional development assumes that growth is possible and desirable everywhere and that it will solve many problems linked to territorial inequality. The discourse on "left-behind" locations underlines that this might not be applicable to many rural or less densely populated areas. It reinforces an idea of growth and 'development' that begins from the potentials of "left-behind" places. However, there is an implicit risk in this "tapping onto local resources", as it resonates with "green extractivist" logics, ranging from mineral extraction, solar plants, or even tourism as an extractive activity. There might be echoes or parallels with arguments deployed within postcolonial logics and can be conceptualized as a form of internal colonialism.

Focus on spatial justice and local grassroot development solutions.

Discontent as the main challenge of top-down approaches in EU policies:

One of the strongest arguments put forward by scholarship on "left-behind places" criticizes the dominance of top-down and growth-oriented policies, which have not brought about positive change in places that suffer from territorial inequality. Against this background, the attention is turned towards protest voting behavior as an expression of local feelings of "left-behindess" that might contrast the policy goals formulated from a "top down" perspective. Beyond discontent, perspectives of the people living in said areas frequently remain absent. It is precisely this absence that underlines the need for an ethnographically informed view that takes the local everyday life as the entry point to cast an intersectional perspective on the construction of places as "left-behind" as well as on the material, everyday implications.

Consider more strongly the concrete experiences of residents beyond their discontent and see them as agents.

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