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EXIT
Exploring sustainable
strategies to counteract
territorial inequalities
from an intersectional
approach

Working Paper

Working definition of 'left behindness' as a form of territorial inequality

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'left behindness' surfaced in academic literature as a rather vague and open concept. It depicts a relational phenomenon of territorial inequality between centres and peripheries but lacks a precise definition. It calls for an alternative idea of 'development' that begins with the potentials but also with the existing problems of 'left behind places' (MacKinnon et al. 2022). We share this call for a local perspective on development; highlighting that the perspectives of the people living in marginalized areas – apart from being portrayed as problematic protest voters – are largely absent from the discourses on 'left behind places.' The conceptualization of 'left behindness' is tightly linked to policy discourses, especially at the EU level. NUTS 2 or NUTS 3 units are usually taken as the scalar dimension for 'left behind' areas, as this is the territorial scale where the EU can intervene through cohesion policies. 'Left behindness' is thus most often ascribed to rather large spatial units. Nevertheless, it has been critically noted that this masks subtle internal differences and the relational aspects within such areas (Gutiérrez-Posada, Plotnikova, and Rubiera-Morollón 2021; Díaz Dapena et al. 2021; Houlden et al. 2022). **With this in mind, the EXIT research takes a small scale, localised place-based approach to delineate the role of different forces and how they interplay to produce uneven effects among local communities.**

2. Working definition

By acknowledging the different scales and varieties of governance structures in different countries, we take the municipal level as a starting point in rural areas while looking at smaller scales within large urban areas. Subsequently, in other research tasks, in some cases the studied territories expand towards neighbouring areas. Thus, the research methodology is adapted to size, organizational and economic structures, as well as to the available data in each national context.

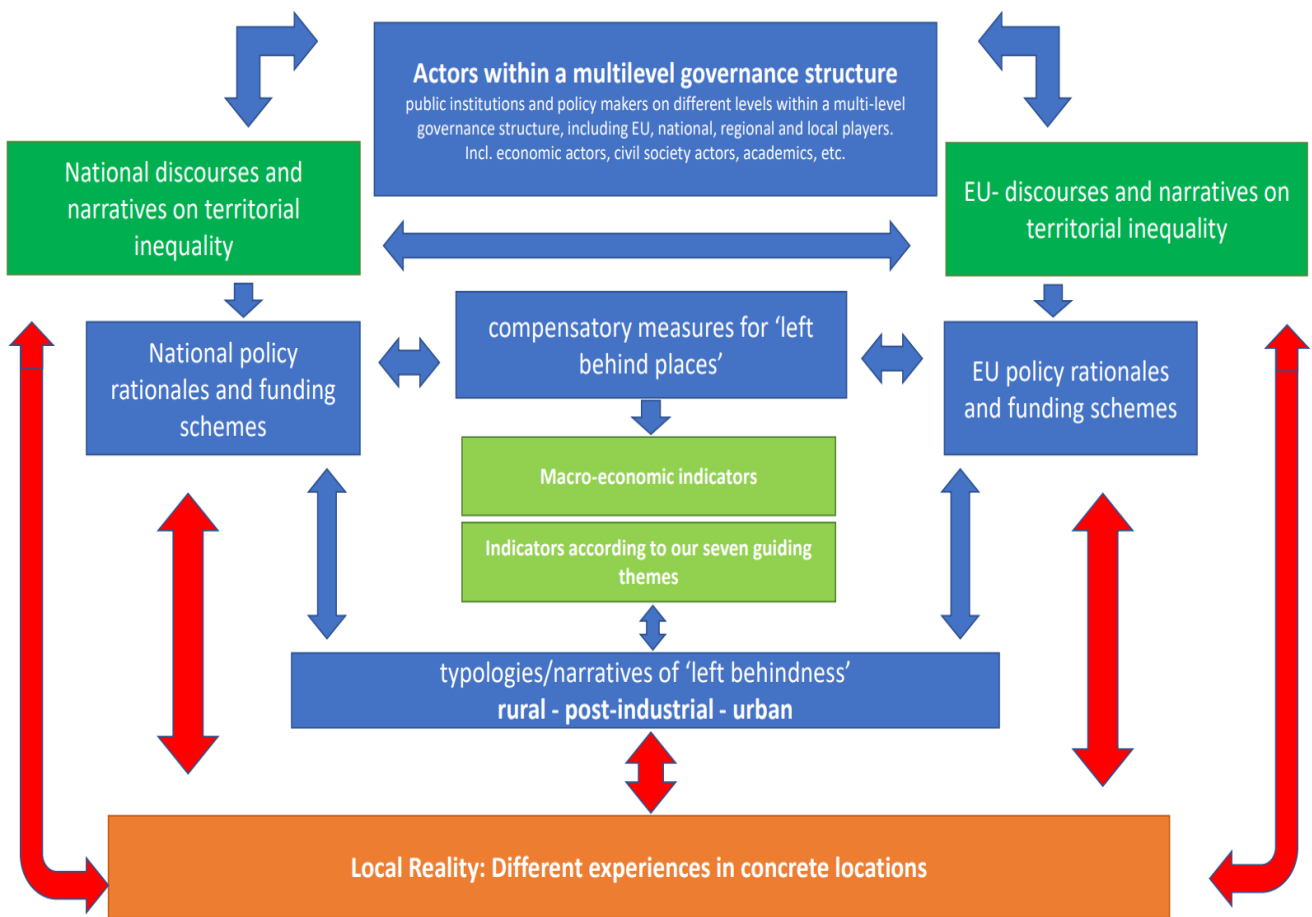
EXIT thereby constructs knowledge regarding the determinants of inequalities in areas characterized as 'left-behind,' while also investigating the factors that contribute to the perception of these areas as such. The methodology employs empirical, local reality as a foundation, while contextualizing it within the broader national and European framework in which this reality is embedded and articulated. It is crucial to comprehend how the locations under examination are conceptualized as 'left behind' or 'marginal,' and to identify the indicators and political rationales utilized to construct and address these socio-territorial classifications.

The interplay of local realities, discursive constructions, and concrete indicators and policies establishes the framework for the working definition pursued in this project. This means that we take the material reality of 'left behind places' as the starting point, outlining the multiplicity of

experiences, possibilities and constrains of residents, as well as of local political, economic and civil society actors.

At the same time ‘left behindness’ is a discursive construction by a range of powerful actors and institutions, which legitimizes compensatory measures on an area-based principle. It is embedded in policy-specific rationales and practices such as the selection of indicators and policy instruments (funding, regulation, construction, etc.). **We therefore 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 indicators and employment of policy instruments on the other.**

3. Components of our working definition



3.1. Local experiences and perceptions of ‘left behindness’

The everyday lives of people living in marginalised places make up the core of our working definition. It is the opportunities that are not available or only available to a limited extent, neighbours and friends who move away, a lack or low quality of healthcare and educational opportunities, the feeling of being passed over by economic prospects, and so on. However, it is not only the fears, but also the way in which people make their ends meet, and above all, how solutions and perspectives are imagined and developed. Thus, the focus is on the local realities of residents in marginalised places, without describing them a priori as powerless and/or angry protest voters, but as people acting and driving change. What happens on the ground, in localized relations, constitutes the basis for exploring sustainable strategies to counteract territorial inequalities from an intersectional approach. In this sense, the ethnographic field research is applied to look at the local reality **through seven guiding themes**, ranging from health and social services, to mobility and immobility, education, housing, employment, social life and digital aspects. These themes lay the groundwork for considering a multitude of interrelated aspects of social and spatial inequalities, and how they play out locally. These themes build a bridge between indicators, material realities, political narratives, and policies.

3.2. Discursive constructions of territorial inequality

Territorial inequalities, beyond the local realities, are discursively constructed along differing aspects, reflecting not only different challenges but also the continuities of marginalisation that each national context within Europe faces. This might be based on the different economic composition of each country, as well as the different multilevel governance structures, and might reflect topographic characteristics, but also longstanding ideas of socio-spatial hierarchies and borders, or industrial and agricultural history. In addition, ecological aspects such as polluting infrastructure or extractive projects play a key role. These aspects are tied together in current narratives and national (self)imaginaries targeting certain places.

These national constructions and policies developed to address territorial inequality often refer to EU policy discourses and funding schemes in various ways. The neoliberal growth paradigm that has been found to be present in the EU cohesion policy appears to be prevalent in some national development strategies, while in other national contexts, a place-based approach focusing on diminishing regional disparities and strengthening weaker regions is more dominant. The reasons, as well as the impacts of these differing approaches on discursive construction, as well as on local realities, need to be considered and scrutinised.

The notion of ‘left behindness’ must therefore be understood as discursively constructed and as a relative condition – also reflected in the varied forms of territorial inequality and disparities that emerge. Within the differing national frameworks, the discursive construction of certain places as contested forms of ‘problem zones’ emerge – ranging from ‘left behind,’ to ‘underdeveloped,’ ‘emptied’ or ‘sacrifice zones.’ They often have problematic stereotypes and derogative ascriptions. We therefore critically question these and understand them as part of constructed as well as materialized ‘national dispositives.’ We consider how these are constructed, but also consider the absences and segments of the population that are overlooked, such as minorities and migrants. While ‘left behind places’ in most national discourses are framed as ‘inner’ problem zones that nonetheless belong to the national imaginary, migrants and minorities are mostly framed as outsiders, who do not belong to the national ‘we’ in the first place.

3.2.1. Typologies of struggling territories

Upon analysing the eight different national contexts included in this research, it is evident that there are various forms of territorial inequality that map out differently in each context. These can be roughly described as **three different typologies of struggling territories with high margins of inequality**. We term them here as rural, post-industrial and urban ‘left behindness’.

Rural ‘left behindness’

In most countries, there is a commonly evoked form of rural ‘left behindness’, referring to areas that are situated remote from urban centres and large agglomerations, often due to topographical circumstances, such as mountainous areas or islands, or historical developments, such as border zones. They typically have sparse populations and may face declining numbers, with younger residents, particularly women, moving away in search of better prospects. As a result, the remaining population tends to be older, with a higher proportion of males and predominantly white residents. This demographic shift leads to lower overall education levels and signs of economic stagnation or regression. Furthermore, these areas often suffer from inadequate public infrastructure, including limited access to social services, healthcare, education, public transport, cultural and leisure facilities, and political representation.

Post-industrial ‘left behindness’

In most of the researched countries, another manifestation of being ‘left behind’ is evident in post-industrial areas. These are characterised mainly by their decline, looking back at a more prosperous industrial past. The closure or departure of an industrial branch may have led to a stark decline in certain places, with rising unemployment and widespread fears of economic, cultural, and social decline. This might also be visible in the closure of local business and public

service infrastructure as well as in educational and health infrastructure. In addition, such places might struggle with environmental issues, as the former industries may have been extracting or polluting the local environment, leaving dire remnants of the local ecological balance. Population wise, these places are characterised similarly to rural areas, as having shrinking populations, with mainly older, male and predominantly white residents, who are framed as “native” and turn to populist parties.

Urban ‘left behindness’

In addition, almost all countries have a form of urban ‘left behindness’, featuring slightly different criteria. These places are usually among the poorest areas in the country, struggling with a range of issues that to an extent are comparable: While there is not a complete lack of public infrastructure or social services, the areas are usually characterised by low quality and/or insufficient capacities to cater to all the local residents and their needs. This leads to a high degree of young people with no or insufficient education as well as a lack of prospects in the labour market, coupled with high unemployment rates. Another characteristic is the combination of a small percentage of the population eligible to vote and low voter turnout among those who are eligible. Unlike rural and post-industrial areas, urban ‘left behindness’ is marked by high population density and a significant presence of young people, migrants, and/or minority groups.

3.2.2. Indicators qualifying territorial inequality

Labelling certain places as ‘left behind’ often serves to justify specific interventions and policy measures. These interventions vary widely and involve a diverse range of actors, including public institutions and policymakers operating at various levels within a multi-level governance structure, including EU, national, regional and local players. They further include actors in the academic as well as in the media realm, shaping the discourses on specific places and their populations, as well as powerful economic actors and civil society organizations. The interaction of the varying interests of these actors and institutions, along with their respective influence, is shaped by policy-specific rationales and practices, which in turn determine the selection of indicators for addressing a particular place. The indicators chosen are often tied to economic activity and range from local GDP, unemployment rates, relative poverty of the local population and with it, low taxable incomes. Population density is a further indicator. In addition, aspects relating to the seven guiding themes, such as lower educational levels and a lack or low quality of public infrastructure and services, but also voting behaviour, are used as indicators. These, in turn, result in a diverse range of implemented policy instruments (such as construction projects, regulations, etc.) and the allocation—or lack—of funding in a specific location.

Although the terminologies and conceptualisations vary across the European countries studied, similar indicators emerge that attribute ‘left behindness’ to specific locations within their respective national contexts. The discourses in the different countries follow similar patterns along the three different types of ‘left behindness’ sketched out above. The way these discourses map out spatially vary between the countries. This may have several interlinked reasons. For instance, some countries may exhibit less pronounced forms of spatial inequalities than others. In addition, differences in size, topography and governmental structures must be considered with regards to what areas are addressed. The countries also differ significantly in their governmental structures: some are highly centralized (e.g., Serbia), others rely heavily on regional or federal levels (e.g., Belgium, Spain, Austria), while in some cases, the local level plays a key role in territorial cohesion policies (e.g., Denmark). However, territorial disparities within individual countries and across the broader European context are primarily analysed using similar overarching key indicators.

4. Conclusion

The concept of ‘left behindness’ should be understood as both discursively constructed and a relative condition, reflecting the diverse forms of territorial inequality and disparities highlighted in the EXIT research. The EXIT project’s conceptual framework defines ‘left behindness’ as a form of territorial inequality arising from a dialectical relationship between peripheral experiences in specific locations and the interplay of political discourses, place-specific indicators, and the implementation of policy instruments.

Our working definition of ‘left behindness’ bridges the tangible realities of life in these areas with an analysis of how influential actors construct and frame certain places as ‘left behind’ through discourse. These fall into three broad categories—rural, post-industrial, and urban contexts—each associated with specific stereotypes, indicators, and policy responses. Understanding and addressing the dual dimensions of ‘left behindness’—local realities and their discursive construction—requires the use of concrete indicators.

On the one hand, economic indicators, such as low GDP per capita, low household disposable income, and reduced purchasing power, provide a quantitative foundation. On the other hand, data aligned with our seven guiding themes further enrich the analysis. These themes include health and social services, mobility and immobility, education, housing, employment, social life, and digital access. These components of our working definition have served as key criteria for selecting two or three locations in each national context where territorial inequality is most pronounced. This approach facilitates a nuanced analysis that connects the lived experiences of residents with the broader discourses and policies shaping their environments.

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