EXIT

Exploring sustainable
strategies to counteract
territorial inequalities
from an intersectional
approach

Working Paper

Participation as a Response to Territorial Inequalities

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Content

Abstract

Territorial inequalities continue to challenge the European Union, particularly in communities experiencing long-term socio-economic decline and limited institutional support. This article draws on the Horizon Europe EXIT project, which implemented a participatory process in sixteen disadvantaged areas across eight countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain and the United Kingdom) to identify locally perceived drivers of inequality and co-design strategies to address them. Thirty-eight strategies were analysed through a comparative framework structured around seven *guiding themes*: housing and regeneration, employment and professional life, community life, mobility, social services and health, education, and digital inclusion. Findings reveal consistent patterns of structural disadvantage, especially in access to services, infrastructure, and socio-economic opportunities, alongside a mismatch between the scale of territorial challenges and the capacity of local actors to respond. The article contributes new empirical evidence on grassroots responses to inequality and highlights the need for territorial cohesion policies that reinforce local agency, multilevel cooperation, and long-term enabling conditions.

1. Introduction

Territorial inequalities have re-emerged as a central concern within the European Union, reflecting a growing spatial divergence in socio-economic conditions despite overall economic progress at national level. Across Member States, rural regions, post-industrial towns and urban districts facing concentrated disadvantage have undergone persistent socio-economic stagnation, uneven demographic trends and a gradual retreat of public and private investment. These uneven trajectories have contributed not only to widening disparities in access to essential services, mobility and opportunities, but also to a heightened sense of abandonment and reduced trust in public institutions. As established by EU Cohesion Policy, addressing these dynamics is critical for ensuring social cohesion, political stability, and a just transition towards sustainable development.

The analytical category of "left-behind" places has gained prominence in academic and policy discourse as a way to conceptualise areas that have been bypassed by economic prosperity and decision-making processes. Yet, important knowledge gaps remain— particularly concerning how drivers of inequality are perceived by residents themselves, how these perceptions intersect with material conditions, and how local actors respond to these challenges through grassroots strategies. Existing cohesion policies have made progress in mapping disparities, but evidence indicates a persistent mismatch between the scale of intervention and the lived realities of affected communities, calling for a stronger incorporation of situated knowledge and **bottom-up** approaches.

This article addresses these gaps by drawing on empirical findings from the EXIT project. Through a participatory process carried out in **sixteen disadvantaged areas** across eight countries; Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain and the UK, residents and stakeholders collaboratively identified local challenges and co-designed strategies to mitigate them. A total of **thirty-eight strategies** were subsequently analysed and categorised under **seven *guiding themes*** covering housing and regeneration, employment, community, mobility, social services and health, education, and digital inclusion.

The **objective** of this article is to provide a comparative analysis of these thirty-eight strategies developed in so-called "left-behind" areas. More specifically, it examines how these strategies are distributed across the project's seven *guiding themes*, the types of responses put forward to tackle different dimensions of inequality, and the common patterns and context-specific dynamics that emerge across the study areas. On this basis, the article discusses what these participatory outcomes reveal about the scope and limits of local agency, as well as the conditions under which such place-based strategies can inform debates on territorial cohesion and the transferability of locally grounded initiatives within the European Union.

2. Participatory approaches to territorial inequalities

Over the last decades, debates on territorial inequalities have increasingly converged around the idea that material disparities are closely intertwined with deficits in participation, representation and recognition (Fraser, 2000; Young, 2000). In many "left-behind" areas, inequalities are not only expressed in income, employment or access to services, but also in the **limited capacity of residents to influence decisions** that directly affect their territories. This has led to a growing consensus that participation should be understood not simply as a procedural add-on to public policy, but as a **substantive right** and a necessary condition for territorial justice and democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1996; Sen, 2009). International human rights and European policy frameworks have progressively recognized the right of individuals and communities to be involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies that concern them, particularly in fields such as urban development, environmental planning and social inclusion (UN-Habitat, 2016; Council of Europe, 2018). In this sense, participation operates simultaneously as a democratic principle and as a corrective mechanism against the long-term marginalization of specific places and populations.

From this perspective, participation is directly linked to the **reconfiguration of power relations** in contexts marked by structural decline. In areas experiencing long-term socioeconomic stagnation, institutional withdrawal or policy failure, it is not only the distribution of resources that is unequal, but also the **distribution of voice and influence** (Gaventa, 2006). Residents of "left-behind" territories often encounter fragmented governance structures, opaque decision-making and limited access to formal arenas of consultation, frequently reduced to low-impact or symbolic participation—what Arnstein (1969) famously characterized as the lower rungs of the "ladder of participation"[1]. This produces what has been described as inequalities of recognition and representation, which reinforce material deprivation and fuel disaffection towards public institutions (Fraser, 2008; Pemberton & Phillimore, 2018). Participatory approaches seek to address these deficits by opening channels for deliberation, enabling communities to articulate their own diagnoses and priorities, and re-anchoring policy processes in the lived realities of those most affected by territorial inequalities. In doing so, they contribute to restoring a sense of

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[1] Sherry R. Arnstein's seminal article *"A Ladder of Citizen Participation"* (1969) proposes an eight-rung metaphorical ladder to conceptualise the different degrees of public involvement in planning and policymaking. Organised into three categories, the model distinguishes between: (1) **non-participation** (*manipulation* and *therapy*), where citizen involvement is merely a façade; (2) **degrees of tokenism** (*informing*, *consultation*, *placation*), where participation exists but does not ensure real influence; and (3) **degrees of citizen power** (*partnership*, *delegated power*, *citizen control*), where communities gain actual decision-making authority. Arnstein's work highlights that many initiatives framed as participatory remain situated in the lower rungs, without redistributing power or enabling meaningful agency for citizens.

legitimacy and responsiveness in places where the social contract has been weakened, and where procedural justice is as important as distributive justice (Rawls, 1993; Schlosberg, 2007).

In parallel, there is a **strong methodological rationale** for integrating participation into research and policy design on territorial inequalities. Conventional approaches, based primarily on macro-indicators and expert-driven analysis, have often proved **insufficient to capture the complexity** of everyday life in disadvantaged areas (Wacquant, 2008; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). They tend to overlook forms of vulnerability, resilience and agency that are embedded in local histories, social relations and spatial practices. Participatory and co-creative methodologies respond to this limitation by recognizing that knowledge about places is not the exclusive domain of institutions or experts, but **is co-produced through the experiences and practices of those who inhabit them**—an idea widely developed in work on co-production and community-based research (Ostrom, 1996; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007). Involving residents, community organizations and local stakeholders in the generation and interpretation of data allows for a more nuanced understanding of how inequalities are perceived, navigated and contested on the ground, contributing to what has been termed *epistemic justice* (Fricker, 2007; Santos, 2014).

Furthermore, participation is not only a means of improving the empirical quality of research, but also a way of reshaping the kinds of questions that are asked and the range of solutions considered. Collaborative processes tend to **highlight issues that are under-represented** in conventional analyses, such as everyday insecurity, stigma, small-scale infrastructural decay, or the cumulative effects of administrative barriers (Kabeer, 2005; Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2014). They also bring to the fore practical knowledge about how existing resources are mobilized, how informal support networks operate, and which institutional arrangements are experienced as enabling or obstructive. In this sense, participatory approaches expand the epistemic field, integrating forms of tacit, emotional and relational knowledge that are essential for designing interventions that are both context-sensitive and socially legitimate (Fals Borda, 1991; Narayan et al., 2000). This resonates with broader shifts towards place-based, relational and **territorialised policy frameworks** in Europe, which emphasise the importance of local knowledge and institutional capacity for effective territorial cohesion (Barca, 2009; EU Territorial Agenda, 2020).

There is also growing evidence that participatory processes **can produce effects that go beyond** the immediate outputs of a given project or policy cycle. By creating spaces for dialogue, negotiation and joint problem-solving, they contribute to **strengthening local capacities, building trust between actors and fostering a sense of collective agency** (Fung, 2006; Mansbridge et al., 2012). In territories affected by demographic decline, economic restructuring or social fragmentation, these processes can play a critical role in rebuilding

social ties and enhancing the ability of communities to organise around shared objectives (Healey, 1997; Mouffe, 2013). Participation thus acquires a dual character: it is at the same time a tool for generating knowledge and a form of intervention in its own right, with the potential to modify relational dynamics, institutional expectations and future trajectories of cooperation. From this vantage point, participatory governance is not merely an instrument of consultation, but a **way of reconfiguring the relationship between state and society**, particularly in contexts marked by territorial injustice (Swyngedouw, 2005; Ansell & Gash, 2008).

European policy frameworks have progressively incorporated these insights. Cohesion Policy, in particular, has formalised the partnership principle, requiring Member States and regions to involve local and regional authorities, economic and social partners, and civil society organisations in the preparation and implementation of programmes (European Commission, 2013). Instruments such as LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) have further encouraged the active involvement of local actors in the design of development strategies, especially in rural, urban and coastal areas facing specific challenges (Dax, Strahl & Kirwan, 2019). At the same time, recent documents such as the Territorial Agenda 2030 and the New Leipzig Charter emphasise the need to anchor transitions in **locally driven processes**, ensuring that interventions are responsive to territorial specificities and that no region is left behind (EU Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning, 2020; EU Ministers Responsible for Urban Development, 2020). These frameworks explicitly link participation with **spatial justice** and **territorial cohesion**, highlighting that the quality of governance processes is an integral component of cohesion outcomes.

However, the implementation of participatory principles remains uneven and, in many cases, **limited to formal consultation or symbolic inclusion**. Empirical studies have shown that participatory provisions are often applied in a minimal or technocratic way, with limited scope for communities to shape agendas, influence resource allocation or follow up on decisions (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2005). This gap between formal commitments and actual practice is particularly acute in "left-behind" territories, where institutional capacities are weak and civic infrastructures have been eroded. Addressing this gap requires not only normative affirmation of participation but also concrete methodological and institutional arrangements that enable **meaningful involvement** throughout the policy cycle, from agenda-setting to evaluation (Fung, 2006; Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). It also requires systematic documentation and analysis of participatory experiences, in order to understand under which conditions they contribute to more equitable and effective territorial governance, and when they risk reproducing existing asymmetries or generating new forms of exclusion. **It is precisely in response to these challenges that EXIT positions its contribution.** By directly addressing the widening territorial inequalities observed across the European Union, EXIT focuses on areas

commonly characterised as "left-behind"—territories experiencing persistent socioeconomic decline, weakened institutional presence and reduced access to opportunities. In doing so, the project contributes to current debates on the structural, governance-related and spatial factors that shape uneven development dynamics within Europe (Mehlbye et al., 2019; Crescenzi, Di Cataldo & Giua, 2020).

A distinctive feature of EXIT is its commitment to **participation as a central component** of the research and intervention process. Rather than assuming that territorial inequalities can be fully understood through external indicators alone, the project recognises the value of residents situated knowledge in revealing how inequality is perceived, experienced and contested in everyday life. This perspective underpins the design of **the final phase of the research,** which operationalises participation not merely as a data-collection tool, but as an approach aligned with broader principles of spatial justice, territorial cohesion and community empowerment. This phase mobilises participatory methodologies that enable residents and stakeholders to jointly identify key problems, prioritise actions and co-design locally grounded strategies for change. This process encourages the emergence of collective interpretations of inequality and promotes agency among actors who are often marginalised from formal decision-making arenas. Methodologically, this work draws on elements of participatory action research, community planning and deliberative governance, structured through a progressive, place-based sequence of workshops that moves from local diagnosis towards the refinement of proposals and cross-territorial reflection on their feasibility and transferability.

Within this framework, participation assumes a specific role; it becomes the mechanism through which locally embedded knowledge is translated into concrete proposals for change. The thirty-eight community-based strategies that constitute the empirical focus of this article are the **direct outcome of this process**. They express how territorial inequalities are perceived and negotiated in everyday life and indicate which levers of intervention communities themselves deem relevant—whether in housing and regeneration, employment and professional life, community and social life, mobility, social services and health, education or digital inclusion. Analysing these strategies comparatively makes it possible to examine how participatory processes shape the formulation of responses, how they reflect the constraints and opportunities present in each context, and how they may contribute to informing policies that are more attuned to the realities of "left-behind" areas. In this way, EXIT contributes to ongoing debates on the role of place-based and participatory approaches in reorienting cohesion policy and territorial development (Barca, McCann & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012).

In this sense, this paper does not treat participation as a neutral methodological choice, but as a constitutive element of the knowledge it analyses. The strategies under examination

are inseparable from the participatory pathways through which they emerged; they are situated, negotiated and collectively owned. By reconstructing and comparing these outcomes, the article seeks to demonstrate that participatory research and policy design can generate **empirically grounded**, **context-sensitive responses** to territorial inequalities. The justification for adopting a participatory approach is therefore twofold. Normatively, it resonates with the recognition of participation as a right and as a condition for territorial justice in the European context. Analytically, it provides access to forms of knowledge and strategic reasoning that would remain invisible in more top-down, indicator-driven approaches. Taken together, these dimensions underline the relevance of participatory methodologies for advancing both the understanding of territorial inequalities and the development of policies aimed at ensuring that no place—and no population within it—is left behind.

3. Methodological note

The analysis presented in this article draws on the participatory process implemented during the last phase of the EXIT project. As discussed in the previous section, participation constitutes a core dimension of the project's conceptual and operational approach to territorial inequalities. The research builds on this premise by acknowledging residents as **key actors** whose expertise is essential for identifying drivers of inequality and co-designing meaningful responses in their territories.

The action-research presented in this paper builds on diagnostic work carried out in earlier phases of the EXIT project—ethnographic research and participatory analysis —and represents the transition from investigation to action-oriented strategy development. The objective was to ensure that proposals emerging from the project would **be relevant to the needs of communities, realistic within local capacities, and aligned with broader principles of spatial justice and territorial cohesion.**

The participatory activities analysed here were conducted between **January and June 2025 in sixteen study areas across eight European countries:** Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Spain and the United Kingdom. To ensure coherence across such diverse contexts, a shared methodological framework[2] was developed within the consortium. This framework defined participatory activities, common objectives, facilitation guidelines, and

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[2] The methodological framework was formalised in the *D6.1 Methodological Guide*, elaborated by EAPN-ES as lead partner of WP6. The guide provided detailed instructions for the planning and facilitation of each workshop activity, including step-by-step descriptions of the participatory exercises, templates for systematic data collection and evaluation, and practical guidance to support inclusive recruitment, ethical engagement, and the creation of safe and deliberative environments adapted to local contexts.

data-collection tools, while maintaining sufficient flexibility to allow context-sensitive adaptations, recognising the different socio-economic and cultural realities of each area.

3.1 Multi-scale participatory design

The participatory design was conceived as a coherent, **multi-level pathway** through which engagement progressively expanded from localised, community-driven reflection to national and transnational deliberation. Instead of organising a set of discrete workshops, this process operationalised a cumulative participatory trajectory, whereby knowledge produced at neighbourhood level was iteratively validated, prioritised, and elevated to broader governance arenas. This sequencing ensured both conceptual continuity and actor continuity, allowing knowledge derived from residents lived experiences to progressively inform subsequent stages of strategic development and policy deliberation. To operationalise this bottom-up logic, this phase was implemented through five interlinked participatory workshops distributed across **three successive territorial scales**.

At the **local** level, three workshops were conducted with the dual aim of returning research findings to the community and co-producing preliminary strategies grounded in local priorities. These included: (1) **Empowerment Workshops**, designed to validate ethnographic insights and renew participants' engagement; (2) **Resident Participatory Workshops**, where participants collectively identified challenges, strengths, and initial solution pathways grounded in their lived experience; and (3) **Stakeholder Workshops**, where institutional and organisational actors reviewed these resident-generated proposals, assessed feasibility and constraints, and contributed complementary perspectives to refine them into actionable strategies. At the **national** level, each country convened a (4) **Country Workshop** in which residents and stakeholders jointly prioritised the strategies previously developed, relying on structured deliberation tools to assess impact, feasibility and fit with existing governance arrangements. Finally, at the **international level**, the pathway culminated in the (5) **International Workshop**, involving representatives—both residents and stakeholders—from the sixteen study areas. This final deliberative stage enabled transnational comparison, collective reflection on transferability conditions and the formulation of policy-oriented insights.

Table 1. *Overview of the participatory pathway*

Workshop	Scale	Main objective
Empowerment Workshop	Local	Return ethnographic findings; validate research interpretations; re-engage participants

Resident Participatory Workshop	Local	Identify key challenges and local strengths through collective and participatory reflection
Stakeholder Participatory Workshop	Local	Co-develop preliminary strategies building on residents' proposals
Country Workshop	National	Prioritise strategies based on feasibility, sustainability and expected impact
International Workshop	International	Reflect on scalability and transferability of strategies

This multi-scalar architecture ensured that each stage of engagement contributed to the next, forming a coherent participatory pathway rather than a series of isolated exercises. By enabling knowledge to travel from local workshops into national prioritisation and international debate—and by ensuring that these reflections were subsequently brought back to communities—the process sought to establish **reciprocal accountability and visibility of community expertise** across governance levels. In territories marked by long-standing experiences of institutional disregard, this continuity proved essential for sustaining engagement, strengthening interpersonal trust, and reinforcing a collective sense of ownership over both the process and its outputs.

3.2 Participant selection

Participant recruitment for the workshops followed a structured approach aimed at ensuring continuity, diversity and territorial representation. Priority was given to participants who **already had took part** in earlier project phases, particularly in the ethnographic fieldwork, recognising the value of established trust and the cumulative knowledge generated through previous interactions. This continuity helped maintain coherence across the participatory pathway and reinforced participants' sense of ownership over the process.

At the same time, selection was guided by **intersectional principles**, seeking to include individuals who differed in gender, age, socio-economic position, migration history, ethnicity and other axes of vulnerability relevant to the study areas. While the extent to which this objective was achieved varied across contexts, national teams actively worked to avoid over-representation of already empowered community profiles and to reach groups whose voices are often marginalised. **Territorial representativeness** was also a core criterion, ensuring that each study area contributed to national and international deliberation. Multiple **recruitment strategies** were adapted to each local context, including personalised outreach

through trusted intermediaries such as social workers, neighbourhood associations and community leaders; snowball sampling; and targeted invitations when specific expertise or profiles were needed to ensure balanced participation.

Taken together, these procedures sought to ensure that those most directly affected by territorial inequalities—and those operating closest to them in practice—were recognised as central agents in the co-production of knowledge and strategies.

3.3 Data production, documentation and ethical considerations

The participatory workshops generated a diverse set of **qualitative materials**, including structured outputs from group exercises, visual data, and fieldnotes documenting group dynamics and contextual elements. All materials were systematically recorded and synthesised using shared reporting templates, ensuring cross-country comparability while preserving contextual specificities.

All procedures complied with the **ethical standards** approved for the EXIT project. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with explicit guarantees regarding confidentiality and the anonymisation of individuals, locations and any sensitive information potentially leading to identification. Particular care was taken to ensure respectful engagement in contexts marked by socio-economic vulnerability and previous negative experiences with institutional interventions. To ensure analytical coherence, the materials generated in each of the sixteen study areas were systematically documented and subsequently integrated into the *Report on country workshops collective outputs (Deliverable D6.2)*[3], which provides a comprehensive account of the implementation and outcomes of this phase. The present article builds upon that consolidated dataset, extracting cross-case insights while remaining faithful to the situated knowledge emerging from each territory.

4. Key findings: Community-based strategies to address territorial inequalities

This section presents the central analytical findings emerging from the participatory process. The strategies co-developed across the study areas offer **a grounded perspective on how territorial inequalities are experienced and collectively problematised** in communities designated as "left behind". They demonstrate that residents are not only

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[3] [1] *D6.2 – Comparative Country Reports* is an official project deliverable submitted to the European Commission under Horizon-CL2-2021, reporting in detail the qualitative and participatory results of WP6 across the 16 study areas.

aware of the structural drivers shaping their territories, but also capable of articulating concrete and context-sensitive proposals for change.

Taken together, these strategies provide **valuable evidence on the priorities formulated at local level;** the domains where inequalities are most acutely felt, the barriers that limit individual and collective wellbeing, and the conditions that are perceived as necessary to sustain dignified livelihoods and social participation. These insights hold particular relevance for policymaking, as they help to centre community agency and territorial knowledge within broader debates on spatial justice, institutional responsiveness and the future development of disadvantaged regions in Europe.

The section is organised in two parts. First, it offers an **overview of the strategies by guiding theme**, highlighting the thematic priorities that emerged. Second, it presents **cross-cutting findings**, drawing connections across contexts to identify broader lessons for the design, governance and transferability of community-based interventions.

4.1 Overview by guiding themes

This section provides a **thematic overview** of the strategies co-developed with participants during the project. For analytical alignment with the overall structure of the EXIT project, each strategy was classified under one of the seven *guiding themes* established by the consortium. These themes reflect **essential dimensions of territorial inequality** in Europe, covering housing and regeneration, employment, community life, mobility, social services and health, education, and digital inclusion. Table 2 summarises the **number of strategies allocated to each theme**, offering a first descriptive picture of the main areas where participants identified challenges and opportunities for local transformation.

Table 2. *Number of strategies by guiding theme*

Guiding Theme	N° Strategies
Social services and health	3
Formal and informal education	3
Employment and professional life	8
Community	7
Housing, environment, and regeneration	9
Mobility and immobility	7

Digital Inclusiveness	1
Total	**38**

As observed, the strategies are distributed across all thematic fields, reflecting the **multidimensional** nature of territorial inequality. At the same time, certain domains—particularly those linked to **housing, access to employment, mobility, and social cohesion**—appear more frequently across territories. This pattern suggests that these areas constitute recurring points of concern within everyday life in the communities that participated.

The thematic overview presented here provides the starting point for the analytical subsections that follow, where each guiding theme is explored in further detail to better understand the types of responses residents consider meaningful in addressing the challenges present in their contexts.

4.1.1 Housing, environment and regeneration

This theme gathered **the largest number of strategies** (9 proposals), suggesting that housing and environmental conditions is a central dimension through which territorial inequalities are perceived and contested. Participants described how deteriorated housing, environmental risks and neglect of the built environment translate into daily hardships and reinforce a sense of institutional abandonment. In response, strategies tended to coalesce around **three interconnected** areas of intervention.

A first group of proposals focused on ensuring access to **adequate and affordable housing**. Participants consistently emphasised the need for stronger public responsibility in guaranteeing minimum housing standards and controlling abusive practices in the rental market.

> *"Many people in Montcada live in small, crowded apartments where there is no space for a washer or drier. These types of services are very important!" (Participant from Montcada, Spain)*

Proposals sought **stronger public involvement in provision and oversight**, calling either for **more inclusive housing models**—such as collaborative or intergenerational arrangements—or for a **more effective enforcement of existing regulations** to ensure minimum standards of habitability. The emphasis was placed not on radical transformation but on closing accountability gaps that allow deterioration and exploitative practices to persist.

A second orientation addressed the visible **decay of buildings and shared spaces**, highlighting the cumulative effects of insufficient maintenance, **inadequate cleaning services and the abandonment of public facilities**. Participants emphasised that the neglect of everyday urban upkeep —from waste accumulation to the deterioration of formerly active community infrastructures— reinforces the perception that their environments are not a policy priority. The closure of schools, empty commercial units and underused recreational spaces was seen not only as a loss of practical functions but also as a visible marker of institutional withdrawal and social demoralisation. Regeneration, therefore, was understood as a process that begins with restoring basic conditions of cleanliness, safety and usability, enabling residents to reappropriate shared environments and rebuild local cohesion.

> *"This mass dumping of waste everywhere gives us a bad image as a very dirty commune. That's the image that others retain of Marchienne-Au-Pont" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)*

> *"It's pretty empty here, we don't have much left, everything's closed down (...) soon we'll have to drive 20 minutes to buy bread" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)*

Third, several proposals focused on **rebalancing environmental responsibilities** by strengthening monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Residents stressed that environmental burdens—such as unmanaged waste, industrial emissions or infrastructural risks—are often concentrated in disadvantaged areas, without adequate compensation or institutional oversight.

> *"Coca-Cola uses Surdulica's water but pays resource usage taxes to Belgrade — this must change" (Participant from Surdulica, Serbia).*

> *"At the EU factories, Knauf runs only two hours a day due to pollution controls, but here they operate 24 hours without adequate filtration" (Participant from Surdulica, Serbia).*

Strategies therefore aimed to ensure that **local communities are not left to cope with these impacts** alone but supported by governance structures with the authority and resources to intervene effectively.

Taken together, these strategies reveal a shared awareness that territorial inequalities materialise in highly visible and deeply felt environments: in deteriorating housing stock, neglected public spaces and uneven exposure to environmental hazards. This aligns with broader European dynamics, where rising housing costs, ageing infrastructure and urban development pressures intensify existing vulnerabilities. In territories marked by long-term

disinvestment or limited political influence, such challenges tend to accumulate, reducing residents' capacity to remain, thrive and shape their own futures.

4.1.2 Employment and professional life

Employment and professional life emerged as a central concern across the territories, with **eight strategies** falling under this theme. Participants consistently linked labour market exclusion to wider social challenges, noting that limited opportunities for stable employment reduce the capacity of residents to remain in their communities, sustain livelihoods and envision a long-term future. The strategies developed in this area therefore sought not only to create jobs, but also to strengthen the foundations for sustained economic participation and territorial viability.

A first orientation focused on **strengthening skills development and vocational pathways**, particularly for groups facing structural barriers to the labour market. Across different areas, participants highlighted that while talent, experience and motivation were present locally, the lack of institutional support often prevented residents from transforming skills into income-generating activities. As one participant noted:

> *"Mentorship is key. Women here have the craft skills — they just need someone to guide them through the business side" (Participant form Golubac, Serbia).*

This perspective illustrates how employability is understood not merely as a matter of individual effort but as a **relational process** requiring accessible guidance, coordination between training providers and employers, and mechanisms to ensure that learning leads to meaningful employment. Such initiatives were seen as important for restoring confidence and reinforcing links between work, social integration and local identity in places where the collapse of traditional industries has left lasting social and economic gaps.

A second cluster of strategies emphasised the need to **improve an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and small business development.** Here, the challenge was not the absence of initiative but limited institutional capacity and access to resources. Strategies therefore proposed **dedicated support mechanisms**—ranging from business clusters to specialised development agencies—aimed at alleviating administrative barriers, improving access to external funding and providing technical assistance for enterprise creation and consolidation. These proposals recognised that **strengthening local economic ecosystems** is essential to counteract depopulation trends and ensure the continuity of services and community life.

A third group of strategies adopted broader territorial development approaches, **integrating employment into long-term visions grounded in local assets** such as agriculture, tourism,

or cultural resources. Participants from one rural case study expressed how existing cultural infrastructure could contribute to a renewed economic vision:

> *"The museum isn't just a place for artifacts — it can be a central point for connecting all of Golubac's cultural assets" (Participant form Golubac, Serbia).*

However, residents also warned that economic revitalisation cannot advance without preliminary improvements to basic infrastructure and environmental conditions. This perspective asserts that tourism can complement local prosperity but **cannot substitute the right of residents to live in safe, healthy and well-connected environments**. Participants emphasised that local wellbeing must remain a central priority, cautioning against development models that rely predominantly on external visitors while overlooking the everyday needs of those who live in the area year-round. Without reliable mobility options, clean surroundings or adequate environmental protections, efforts to promote tourism risk reinforcing existing asymmetries, whereby benefits accrue elsewhere while burdens remain local.

> *"How can we develop tourism if the road connections between tourist sites are poor, the Danube is polluted, and a landfill is located in a weekend settlement?" (Participant form Golubac, Serbia).*

These reflections underline that development must be **balanced**, ensuring that the benefits of external flows do not overshadow everyday needs. Strategies therefore prioritised strengthening local wellbeing as a prerequisite for sustainable economic transformation. By combining sectoral initiatives, proposals underlined the value of **multi-actor cooperation** and **incremental capacity-building**, particularly in rural settings where economic decline threatens the continuity of community life. In this sense, employment was understood not merely as a labour market issue but as a **core foundation for territorial viability and social cohesion**.

4.1.3 Mobility and immobility

Mobility emerged as a key concern across the strategies, pointing to its role as a fundamental condition for territorial inclusion and access to rights. The **seven proposals** classified under this theme reflect particularly acute challenges in rural and post-industrial areas, where insufficient transport systems restrict residents' capacity to reach employment opportunities, essential services and social participation. Limited or unreliable mobility reinforces isolation for youth, older adults, and low-income households, amplifying inequalities already rooted in spatial disconnection.

> *"Public transport is limited, and taxis charge too much. It makes getting around very difficult" (Participant form Golubac, Serbia)*

The strategies adopted diverse approaches, depending on the nature of mobility constraints. Several interventions centred on improving public transport availability, clarity and affordability, grounded in the belief that mobility should remain a publicly guaranteed service rather than depend on informal or volunteer-based arrangements. This reflects a demand for equity in mobility standards between peripheral and better-connected urban settings. Other proposals incorporated a multi-scalar approach, linking local infrastructure enhancements with renewed regional connections to major economic and service hubs—acknowledging that mobility inequalities are relational and shaped by broader territorial structures.

> *"It would be useful to draw parallels with other regions in the south, particularly in terms of supra-communal mobility, which is non-existent. The situation is even more complicated for villages such as Doiche or Petigny" (Participant from Couvin, Belgium)*

In more urbanised contexts, concerns shifted towards everyday accessibility and safety, particularly for those with reduced autonomy. Here, mobility was framed not only as transport but as the ability to move confidently within public space—requiring qualitative improvements such as safer pedestrian environments, inclusive design and integrated mobility planning.

Finally, some strategies embedded mobility claims within wider struggles for environmental justice and territorial recognition. These proposals highlighted how major infrastructure projects can generate long-term externalities—pollution, fragmentation, reduced quality of life—and called for compensatory or redistributive measures.

4.1.4 Community

Strategies classified under the Community and Social Life theme address the need to rebuild social cohesion and sustain everyday forms of interaction in areas affected by long-term decline. **Seven strategies** from diverse territorial contexts converge around a common diagnosis: the erosion of the social fabric—linked to disinvestment, demographic change and institutional withdrawal—has weakened collective life and diminished residents' capacity to mobilise resources and mutual support. Across territories, proposals follow three complementary orientations.

First, several strategies emphasise the recovery of shared physical spaces as enablers of social interaction and belonging. The reactivation of underused facilities or public

environments was understood not only as a material improvement but **as a way to restore visibility, dignity and symbolic ownership of place**. In some cases, this was accompanied by new coordination roles aimed at ensuring continuity and fostering participation over time.

A second set of proposals focuses on strengthening **local support networks**, particularly for groups facing heightened social vulnerability. These initiatives recognise that cohesion is enabled through informal care, listening spaces and accessible points of contact that help counteract isolation and support everyday problem-solving in contexts where access to services is limited.

> *"In the end, when you look at all the project sheets, what people are asking for, what is crucial, are meeting places and exchanges of local services... these places... wouldn't cost very much and would solve a whole range of social problems"* (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)

Finally, strategies also incorporate **cultural and intercultural engagement** as a response to fragmentation and mistrust. Through activities that connect diverse groups and generations, these proposals understand social cohesion as a deliberate and sustained effort, especially in areas marked by demographic change or stigma.

4.1.5 Social services and health, Formal and informal education and Digital inclusiveness

These **three themes** accounted for a smaller proportion of strategies—three proposals each for social services and health, as well as for education, and one proposal addressing digital inclusion. **Their more limited representation does not imply reduced importance**. Rather, it reflects the **need for prioritisation** within the participatory process, as communities concentrated first on the most immediately disruptive challenges in their territories. Even so, the strategies developed under these themes highlight essential dimensions of wellbeing and reveal concerns that strongly shape residents' everyday experience.

Across territories, proposals in the field of **social and health services** focused on closing persistent gaps in access and ensuring continuity of care. Participants reported growing difficulties in securing basic healthcare provision, especially in places where demographic and territorial dynamics hinder service retention:

> *"We had a small clinic, but it was closed because there weren't enough doctors. First, the doctor's visits were reduced from twice a week to once a week, and then eventually, the clinic was shut down"* (Participant from Couvin, Belgium)

Strategies sought to reinforce community-based delivery models by decentralising services, diversifying elderly care options and fostering stronger coordination among local organisations. These proposals illustrate shared concerns about the deterioration of primary care and the need to guarantee fair access regardless of settlement type or population distribution.

Education-related strategies reflected the multiple roles that educational institutions play in these areas—beyond academic learning. Schools were described as protective environments and key points of connection between families, communities and public institutions. Priorities included improving the physical condition of school facilities to ensure safe and accessible learning environments, alongside formalising partnerships between schools and neighbourhood actors to reinforce social ties and strengthen mutual trust. These strategies underscore that improving educational environments is not only a matter of infrastructure, but also a lever for community cohesion and intergenerational engagement.

> *"Almost every year we hear the same about the schools – the sidewalks outside are broken, the fences are rusted, and we're just waiting for something to happen" (Participant from Pyrgos, Greece)*

Finally, the theme of **digital inclusion**—represented by a single but highly relevant proposal—addressed emerging inequalities linked to the digitalisation of public services. While digital tools can broaden access, participants expressed concern that current transitions may widen exclusion if not accompanied by tailored support:

> *"The proposal is to make a whole range of IT and digital procedures accessible to a whole range of people, by building on and reinforcing existing structures... to encourage individual support for problems encountered personally by the population" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Bellgium)*

The strategy thus prioritised **personalised assistance through existing community infrastructures**, recognising that the ability to exercise social and administrative rights increasingly depends on digital competencies and connectivity.

Taken together, these strategies reaffirm that **social protection, education and digital accessibility remain core elements of territorial wellbeing**. Although fewer proposals emerged in these domains, the issues addressed are deeply consequential, signalling the need for sustained institutional attention to ensure that transitions in service delivery do not leave residents without the support and opportunities necessary for a dignified life.

4.2 Concluding insights from the thematic analysis

The thematic distribution of strategies reflects how residents and stakeholders interpret the challenges and opportunities shaping their everyday environments. While the emphasis varies across study areas, **housing conditions, access to employment, mobility, and the vitality of community life frequently emerged as focal points of concern**. This suggests that material living conditions and opportunities for social and economic participation are closely interlinked with residents' capacity to plan for their futures within their territories.

At the same time, the strategies reveal important dimensions of **local resilience**. Across contexts, participants recognised the presence of active networks, shared identities, and forms of civic engagement that provide a foundation for community-driven transformation. Even in areas experiencing structural constraints, the participatory process highlighted existing strengths that could be leveraged to support change—whether through local leadership, established community organisations or long-standing traditions of mutual support.

> *"Well, that's just Marchienne! There are beautiful corners, there are lots of beautiful things being done and existing. There's culture, there's immense solidarity…"*
> *(Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium, 2025)*

The proposals developed during WP6 should therefore be understood not solely as responses to deficits, but as **expressions of collective knowledge** about what supports wellbeing and cohesion at the territorial level. Although the feasibility of implementation varies—often depending on institutional support beyond the local scale—the strategies offer grounded insight into priority areas where targeted action could generate meaningful improvements.

This thematic overview serves as a reference for the cross-cutting analysis that follows. By examining recurring orientations and shared concerns across different contexts, the next section identifies a **set of overarching findings** with implications for policy design, governance arrangements and the broader transferability of community-based approaches within the EXIT project.

4.3 Cross-cutting analytical findings

Beyond the *thematic* overview presented above, several key cross-cutting findings emerged from the strategies co-developed in the sixteen study areas. While each proposal responded to specific territorial characteristics, the participatory process revealed **several recurrent concerns and priorities that cut across national and spatial contexts**.

The findings derived from this transversal analysis highlight **three areas** that repeatedly emerged during the workshops:

1. Perceived institutional abandonment and governance disconnect
2. Erosion of trust and strong demands for accountability
3. Universal demand for inclusive community spaces as a condition for territorial agency

Together, these insights demonstrate that territorial inequalities are not merely the result of gaps in services or economic resources. They reflect **deeper forms of exclusion**, in which constrained access to opportunities, weakened governance relations, fragmented social fabrics, and limited channels to influence decision-making reinforce one another over time. In many study areas, these dynamics contribute to a **progressive erosion of agency and future prospects**, whereby communities are aware of the transformations affecting their territories but lack the institutional responsiveness and material means to shape them. Territorial inequality therefore emerges as a condition produced not only by what is missing, but also by **what is systematically withheld**: recognition, responsiveness, and the capacity to participate on equal terms in social and spatial development.

The following subsections develop these key findings in detail, illustrating how they emerged across study areas and what they reveal about the demands, aspirations and constraints shaping community-driven responses to territorial inequality.

4.3.1 Perceived institutional abandonment and governance disconnect

Across several study areas, the most consistent finding was a widespread perception of **systemic institutional withdrawal**. Participants repeatedly expressed that public authorities appear distant from everyday concerns, generating a persistent feeling of being left to cope with challenges alone. As one resident clearly stated:

> *"The problem with Montcada is that it seems that it has been forgotten by the law and the state. But we haven't forgotten that we have will and all sorts of resources"*
> (Participant from Montcada, Spain)

This captures a broader sentiment: territories do not feel inherently deprived, but rather **deprived of attention**, recognition and the means to act.

This sense of abandonment was evident in the deterioration of public infrastructure—housing, public spaces, transport, and local services—which residents interpreted not as isolated failures, but as **symptoms of institutional neglect**. A participant vividly illustrated this phenomenon when reflecting on the accumulated decay of the environment:

"This photo[4] of an abandoned vehicle overrun with vegetation shows the general abandonment of the area, a forgotten neighbourhood, the abandonment of respect for the environment, the abandonment of children. How did it come to this?" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)

Institutional distance also materialised in governance dynamics marked by **fragmented responsibilities and slow responses**, where even simple issues require prolonged negotiations between multiple authorities. Residents frequently highlighted that needed solutions fall outside local jurisdiction or beyond available budgets, fuelling the impression of a governance architecture too fragmented to guarantee rights effectively.

Furthermore, residents highlighted that institutional withdrawal is not only material but also **symbolic**: it manifests as **invisibility in decision-making**. Public consultations often fail to reach those most directly affected by inequality, leading to diagnoses that overlook key needs. As one stakeholder explained:

"The problem is that they're developing a mobility plan and the professionals in the field aren't being consulted, whereas we see the challenges and difficulties our trainees face on a daily basis. Their citizens' consultations are not attended by our public. They are not represented and so, in their diagnosis, they have only gathered part of the information on needs" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)

This **governance disconnect** reinforces mistrust and discourages participation, even when residents are deeply motivated to improve their environments. Co-developed strategies therefore seek to **restore proximity**, enhance transparency, and create **more direct and accountable decision-making channels**, recognising that bridging this institutional distance is foundational to tackling territorial inequalities.

4.3.2   Erosion of trust and strong demands for accountability

The perceived withdrawal of public institutions not only generates frustration, but also **fundamentally undermines trust** in the governance systems meant to uphold territorial equality. Distrust develops gradually, rooted in repeated experiences where the **support that should be guaranteed** is instead delayed, fragmented or absent. Over time, residents learn to expect less, and this shift in expectation becomes **a powerful indicator of territorial**

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[4] This quotation forms part of a photovoice exercise implemented during the Resident Participatory Workshops. Photovoice is a participatory visual research method in which participants use photography to document and reflect on aspects of their lived environment. Within the EXIT participatory process, this technique was used to capture residents' perceptions of both challenges and strengths characterising their territories and to support collective discussion and interpretation.

inequality. Residents across multiple study areas described experiences where **expectations were continually raised**, often through new policies, planned interventions or public consultations, but rarely matched with **visible or sustained change**.

> *"All I see in these pictures is disappointment and broken promises"* (Participant from Montcada, Spain)

In these places, public institutions are perceived as present in discourse but **absent in practice**, leading to the belief that some territories have been **quietly removed from the priorities of the state**. This erosion of trust becomes self-reinforcing. When services deteriorate — decaying housing, unreliable public transport, disappearing community spaces — what is at stake is not only material well-being but a **relational contract** between the state and its citizens. Residents interpret these conditions as evidence that they have been deprioritised, that some places are allowed to fall behind because **their rights carry less weight**.

> *"No one is developing Surdulica, and that is why it remains underdeveloped"* (Participant from Surdulica, Serbia)

This erosion of trust is closely intertwined with the **material and symbolic degradation of local environments**. Residents read deteriorating housing, unmaintained public spaces, unreliable transport and the disappearance of community facilities not merely as technical failures, but as **signals of unequal worth**. In areas perceived as "left behind", the persistence of decay suggests that these territories have slipped to the margins of political concern.

> *"We don't even have bins in our neighborhood. You have to drive to the central square"* (Participant from Archanes, Greece)

> *"This mass dumping of waste everywhere gives us a bad image as a very dirty commune. That's the image that others retain of Marchienne-Au-Pont"* (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)

One resident from Montcada, Spain, captured this interpretation with the expression *"aquí todo vale" / "here anything is allowed"*, used to convey the impression that norms, care and protection operate with **lower standards** in their neighbourhood than elsewhere. In this sense, the built environment becomes a visible inscription of **hierarchies of value** between territories.

Distrust is further amplified when participatory processes remain **symbolically inclusive but practically inconsequential**. Many participants described how they had been invited

to meetings, workshops or consultations where their experiences were heard, documented and sometimes praised, yet **no tangible changes followed**.

> *"Another working group would just be an endless continuation of discussion with no effect. My problem has been known to everyone for decades, but no one cares. It's by far the issue we feel most left out" (Participant from Couvin, Belgium)*

In these contexts, participation is no longer automatically associated with empowerment; it risks being interpreted as **a mechanism to extract information and consent without redistributing power or resources**.

> *"Words are nice, but what happens in practice? I want to see something change in our everyday life" (Participant from Acharnes, Greece)*

This sentence crystallises a central demand: participation must be **linked to implementation**, otherwise it undermines rather than strengthens institutional legitimacy.

The organisational architecture of public services often reinforces this dynamic. Residents reported that responsibilities are fragmented across different agencies and levels of government, making it difficult to identify **who is actually accountable** for persistent problems. Everyday interactions with bureaucracies reinforce this sense of opacity. One resident from Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, Italy described *"phoning five different numbers before receiving advice"*, an experience that was perceived not simply as an inconvenience, but as confirmation that **systems are not designed around residents' needs**. Access to rights becomes a matter of persistence, time and knowledge, which are unevenly distributed and particularly scarce in territories that already face multiple disadvantages.

> *"It is so frustrating having to deal with the local government, ADIF, and whoever else to do anything! We always need more money and more people to do things. Residents are starting to get tired of doing so much heavy lifting. At the end it makes you just want to give up!" (Participant from Montcada, Spain)*

> *"…I'm sorry, but the fact that social services are lacking is at the root of a lot of the problems here" (Participant from Couvin, Belgium)*

Taken together, these experiences produce a specific form of distrust and scepticism not only towards institutional **capacity**, but towards institutional **intentions**. Residents start to suspect that neglect is not merely the result of limited budgets or administrative inefficiencies, but **a patterned way of governing certain places**—a form of territorialised

inequality in which delayed responses, fragmented responsibilities and unfulfilled commitments become normalised.

However, this erosion of trust does not translate into simple withdrawal or apathy. On the contrary, many of the strategies co-developed in the workshops reveal a **reorientation of civic energy from participation to accountability**. Communities are not only asking to be heard; they are designing tools to **monitor, pressure and constrain** institutions. In some areas, this took the form of neighbourhood-based groups explicitly focused on overseeing the performance of housing agencies, documenting problems collectively and challenging what residents described as a "passive and opaque" implementation of housing policy. In others, strategies were oriented towards demanding **compensation for the impacts of large infrastructures**, using alliances between residents, local authorities and civil society to shift responsibilities onto higher-level institutional and private actors. Elsewhere, the priority was to **recreate physical and institutional spaces for listening**, where residents and administrations could meet on more equal terms and rebuild damaged relationships.

These initiatives share a common logic as they seek to transform diffuse frustration into **structured civic pressure**, turning demands for help into demands for **answers**. Underlying this shift is a broader call for a **renewed territorial social contract**, in which institutions recognise that access to basic services and dignified environments is a **right**, not a contingent benefit; that consultation without follow-up weakens democratic legitimacy; and that accountability is not exhausted by formal procedures but requires **substantive responsiveness** and traceable commitments over time.

From this perspective, the erosion of trust observed in "left behind places" should not be interpreted solely as a symptom of discontent, but as **a diagnostic of democratic risk**. When communities repeatedly observe that their environments deteriorate, that decisions are taken elsewhere, and that participation is detached from outcomes, they begin to question whether they are being governed **under the same conditions of respect and reciprocity** as other citizens.

> *"It's not just about appearances. It's about what opportunities you have, whether you feel safe, whether you're respected" (Participant from Acharnes, Greece)*

The strong demands for accountability articulated in the EXIT workshops signal a refusal to normalise this situation. They constitute a clear message; addressing territorial inequalities requires not only redistributing resources, but **rebuilding credible, accountable and mutually binding relationships** between institutions and the residents of these territories.

4.3.3 Universal demand for inclusive community spaces as a condition for territorial agency

Across the study areas, what emerged most clearly was **a shared and urgent demand for inclusive community spaces**—not simply as physical locations, but as essential infrastructures that enable social connection, collective organisation, and democratic participation. Participants consistently linked the deterioration of everyday support networks to **the closure or inaccessibility of places where social life once unfolded**. Without such spaces, opportunities to build trust, articulate shared concerns, and participate in public life become severely constrained.

Residents explained that, lacking welcoming public spaces, interaction is increasingly confined to private circles of family and close friends, limiting exposure to different realities and **reducing the visibility of shared challenges**.

> *'It's a good thing these community places exist, because otherwise I'd have gone wrong, I'd be out on the street messing around with everyone else" (Participant from Marchienne-Au-Pont, Belgium)*

Their testimony reflects the crucial protective function of community infrastructures: they are **entry points to belonging**, and the first layer through which residents **re-state and reclaim agency over their environment and the care for the social fabric** in ways that feel inclusive, visible and grounded in the local reality.

This need was particularly prominent in territories undergoing demographic and economic transition. In former industrial areas, residents recalled how factories once served not only as employment hubs but also as **organisers of collective identity and political mobilisation**. Their decline has left communities **searching for a unifying narrative**, while living through the social void left behind. Elsewhere, there was a strong fear of becoming **"dormitory towns"**—places where life happens elsewhere, where newcomers remain unconnected to long-term residents, and where the territory becomes simply a place to sleep rather than **a place to live collectively**.

> *"They may live here, but they have nothing to do with Ternitz" (Participant from Ternitz, Austria)*

Territorial change also brings anxieties around **gentrification**. Improvements may come, but not necessarily for those who have endured decline. In this light, territorial stigma reinforces marginalisation, shaping not only how outsiders see these areas but **how residents see their own futures**. Fatigue sets in when every discussion is framed around deficits rather than potential, weakening morale and inhibiting participation.

Despite these constraints, engagement is not absent. Residents repeatedly demonstrated willingness to participate in shaping solutions but pointed out that **the burden disproportionately falls on the same individuals**, generating exhaustion and uneven representation.

> *"We are used to local people not wanting to participate and engage in actions, and that it's always the same people who mobilize" (Participant from Couvin, Belgium)*

For this reason, the strategies co-developed during the workshops frequently prioritised the establishment of multi-functional community centres supported by dedicated social coordinators capable of sustaining engagement over time. These figures were not seen as facilitators of temporary activities, but as **structural connectors**: professionals bridging the gap between disparate residents, linking local initiatives with institutional support, and ensuring that community organisation does not depend solely on unpaid volunteer labour. This model is essential across geographical contexts—from dispersed rural areas struggling with isolation to suburban peripheries at risk of anonymity and post-industrial cities searching for new collective identities— because it recognises that **community life requires active infrastructures**, not just goodwill. Communities cannot thrive in a vacuum: they need **visible, accessible and reliable public spaces** where people can meet, identify common issues, and assemble around shared aspirations.

Residents were also explicit in stating that such spaces cannot become substitutes for structural public responsibility.

> *"We need stronger institutional support — community engagement alone won't fix structural gaps" (Participant from Pyrgos, Greece)*

This concern reflects an awareness that the **burden of maintaining cohesion** and participation often falls on the same few individuals, while essential decisions remain beyond the community's reach. Residents expressed a shared expectation that **authorities must actively** support the infrastructures that enable daily life, instead of **relying on volunteer effort** to compensate for uneven territorial development.

What this finding shows is that territorial inequality is experienced not only through limited access to services or deteriorating environments. It is also lived through the **gradual disappearance of the public sphere**; fewer opportunities to meet others, fewer occasions to be recognised as part of a collective, and fewer channels to take part in shaping the future of the place where one lives. The loss of these spaces has direct political consequences, because without them, communities struggle to maintain visibility, to organise and to sustain confidence in their ability to influence decisions.

Ensuring territorial equality therefore requires **creating and protecting** the spaces where community life takes place. These are the settings in which residents can express their aspirations, share knowledge and work together in ways that reflect their own priorities. Community spaces must be understood as **practical and democratic infrastructures** that allow people not only to stay in their territories, but to **participate** fully in them. Supporting these infrastructures is a core public responsibility and without stable institutional backing, even the most promising community initiatives struggle to become long-lasting drivers of positive change.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that territorial inequalities are not only material, but also **political** and **relational**. They take shape through uneven access to opportunities, weak institutional responsiveness and the erosion of the social infrastructures that enable residents to organise and express a collective voice. Yet, throughout the realities examined, communities consistently demonstrated capacity, knowledge and willingness to propose meaningful solutions grounded in their lived experience. Their strategies—from revitalising abandoned spaces to strengthening neighbour networks—reflect a deep attachment to place and a determination to reclaim agency over local development.

However, the analysis also makes evident that local creativity alone cannot redress structurally produced inequalities. The most promising strategies rely on **hybrid governance models** in which community mobilisation is matched with sustained institutional support. Residents repeatedly stressed that participation must lead to outcomes, not fatigue; that initiatives require continuity, not short-term project cycles; and that energy from the ground must be accompanied by **accessible, long-term funding**. When successful interventions disappear after a brief period, the sense of abandonment is not alleviated — it is renewed.

The focus on locally achievable actions reveals a further constraint, communities tend to design strategies only within the narrow range of what they believe can realistically be supported by institutions. This **limited horizon of possibility** is itself a product of inequality, where territories learn to expect less and adapt to reduced prospects for transformation. Participation therefore plays a dual role. It produces legitimate knowledge and ownership, but it also becomes a test of whether institutions are willing to share responsibility for change rather than outsourcing it to those already facing disadvantage.

The overarching conclusion is that communities are prepared to act, but they cannot and should not address territorial inequality alone. A more equal future for "left behind

places" requires a **rebalancing of power**, where public authorities recognise and sustain the infrastructures—physical, economic and social—that make collective agency possible. Territorial justice depends on ensuring that every community not only has the right to remain, but also the **right to participate**, to be heard, and to shape the conditions of its own development. Real change lies in turning the resilience of communities into a shared project with institutions, supported by community-based formal and informal movements and territorially rooted civil society organisations, where public investment and responsibility rise to meet the strength, creativity and commitment already present on the ground.

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