



POLICYMAKERS' GUIDE

Sustainable strategies to counteract territorial inequalities:

Integrating local know-how in policymaking

EXIT Exploring Sustainable
Strategies to Counteract
Territorial Inequalities from
an Intersectional Approach



Date of publication: **FEBRUARY 2026**

ISBN number: 978-84-09-82640-7

Images used under license from Shutterstock.com



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. Project Number: 101061122

The report has been drafted with feedback and input from the following participant institutions:

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA, **UB** (Project Coordinator)

UNIVERSITA CA' FOSCARI VENEZIA, **UNIVE**

TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITAET WIEN, **TU WIEN**

KMOP - SOCIAL ACTION AND INNOVATION CENTER, **KMOP**

UNIVERSIDAD DE OVIEDO, **UNIOVI**

UNIVERSITE LIBRE DE BRUXELLES, **ULB**

CENTAR ZA SOCIJALNU POLITIKU, **CSP**

RED EUROPEA DE LUCHA CONTRA LA POBREZA Y LA EXCLUSION SOCIAL EN EL ESTADO ESPANOL, **EAPN**

AALBORG UNIVERSITET, **AAU**

ARCI APS, **ARCI**

THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK, **WARU**



INTRODUCTION

Inequalities within and between areas commonly labeled as “left behind” remain a persistent challenge across Europe, raising questions about their causes and the strategies needed to address them. To investigate these phenomena, the research **Exploring Sustainable Strategies to Counteract Territorial Inequalities from an Intersectional Approach (EXIT)** brings together seven universities and four civil society organizations from eight European countries. The project **critically examines the concept of “left behindness”**, exploring its multiple dimensions and contextual variations while identifying locally grounded, sustainable strategies to address territorial inequalities.

Working closely with communities on the ground, the intention is to capture the everyday experiences of people living and working in these areas through an **intersectional and participatory approach**, exploring how factors such as gender, age, and migration status shape their lived realities. Using a place-based methodology focused on the local level, the research has focused on seven policy areas: social services and health; education; employment; community and social life; housing and environment; mobility; and digital inclusiveness. Through mixed-methods research with an eminent ethnographic focus, EXIT works to identify effective responses to territorial inequalities and share insights across communities and countries to support more sustainable and inclusive local futures. The results presented in this Guide are informed by community voices gathered through a three-year ethnographic and participatory research.

The bottom-up approach allows a broader debate on territorial inequalities while also offering practical guidance for action. The Guide aims to **bridge the gap between local experiences and policy processes**, offering concrete elements to better understand and address territorial inequalities.

By connecting local perspectives with policy frameworks, EXIT highlights that local communities are primarily concerned by the State’s withdrawal from territorial inequality issues. Inequalities are perceived both as a material deprivation and as concrete obstacles for meaningful participation in economic, social, and civic spaces. There is therefore an urgent need for policy approaches that incorporate measures enabling local communities to play an active role in reducing inequalities. Local communities must be recognized as political actors, possessing both the capacity and tools to foster broader engagement across multiple levels of the State. Networks facilitated by civil society organizations play a crucial role in this regard, strengthening exchanges and learning across administrative tiers and territories. Yet it is important to acknowledge that grassroots initiatives, while vital, can also operate as a double-edged sword. In contexts of low public investment, local initiatives often fill gaps left by the State, effectively assuming responsibilities that would otherwise be publicly provided. When such local efforts substitute institutional support, they risk symbolizing State withdrawal rather than serving solely as a resource for communities.

Although motivated local actors can foster effective cross-sectoral cooperation, the State remains essential as the ultimate guarantor of sustainable local development. At the same time, it is often perceived as lacking sufficient on-the-ground knowledge to catalyze locally embedded, sustainable change, and may inadvertently constrain the transfer of successful strategies across contexts. This limitation is linked to rigid bureaucratic systems, funding mechanisms shaped by socio-demographic and geographic criteria, and the low institutional recognition of community efforts. This highlights the need for multi-level governance cooperation, ensuring that higher levels of government are informed by place-based knowledge and can effectively support local initiatives.

EXIT findings are shared here to enhance local understanding, inform bottom-up policy development, and facilitate effective communication among governance actors.

Grounded in our research evidence, the Guide examines the **multiple factors and complex interactions underlying territorial inequalities**, using accessible language to explore key challenges and potential strategies for addressing them. It recognizes common barriers across contexts while encouraging policymakers to adapt insights to their unique circumstances. By establishing shared terminology for challenges, outcomes, and pathways toward long-term change, the Guide aims to **facilitate smoother collaboration between local communities and policymakers**, supporting multi-actor cooperation toward sustainable strategies that counteract territorial inequalities.

To present these complexities clearly, the material is organized around the main drivers of territorial inequalities and the practical responses developed to address them, concluding by providing some suggestions **on how to apply this knowledge to support local activism and improve co-programming mechanisms.**

Acknowledging and understanding the diversity of “left-behind” experiences across Europe, the Guide begins by **defining key concepts such as “left behindness,” “local communities,” “stakeholders,” and “policymakers,” establishing a shared analytical lens.** It then introduces working concepts, that highlight the primary domains of territorial inequality, including policy areas, key drivers and social impacts generated through local communities initiatives. These concepts function as building blocks allowing complexity to be navigated in a structured and comprehensible manner.

The following sections analyze the drivers and consequences of territorial inequalities, alongside community perceptions and reflections on co-programming policy mechanisms. The third part of the Guide presents five general impacts produced by grassroots strategies, identified through a participatory process with residents and local stakeholders. Despite variability across cases, these strategies reveal common features. The “factors of transferability” of these initiatives are examined next, illuminating obstacles to effective collaboration between policymakers and grassroots organizations and local actors in countering territorial inequalities. Existing mechanisms and legal frameworks are highlighted to suggest practical measures and support a robust multi-level cooperation.

1. KEYWORDS AND BASIC CONCEPTS DEFINITIONS

Individuals living or working in contexts labelled as “left behind” are generally well acquainted with concepts such as ‘left behindness’ or ‘local community’. However, these concepts are often interpreted differently and carry context-specific meanings. To address this and ensure clarity, the Guide proposes clear and common definitions to establish a shared understanding among communities and policymakers.



Left behindness is defined by the EXIT project as a ‘form of territorial inequality that emerges as a dialectic relationship between a peripheral experience in concrete locations on the one hand and political discourses as well as the place-specific employment of indicators and policy instruments on the other. Three distinct typologies of struggling territories with high levels of inequality have been identified: rural, post-industrial, and urban ‘left behindness’.

This definition highlights that both local communities and policymakers play a key role in defining what ‘left behindness’ means. Building strong, open dialogue between these actors is therefore crucial to ensure that policies reflect real needs and local knowledge.



Local communities are composed of individual citizens and collective actors which share a geographical area and institutional features, and it may be considered a unique body, or in other cases it may be further analyzed to distinguish different subgroups. The individual residents’ experiences are shaped by individual factors such as gender, age, background, ethnicity, health conditions, etc, and may greatly differ. Among collective actors, we can differentiate between local governments and stakeholders. The first category holds a specific type of power and experiences specific struggles: they can enable or restrict the actions of other actors, influenced by legal and administrative constraints as well as the electoral nature of their positions. ‘Stakeholders’ is a collective term that refers to different types of structured organizations animated by specific interests, such as civil society organizations, NGOs or volunteering associations, private companies, etc.

All these actors, despite their different roles, experience territorial inequality, because they either reside in or interact with these areas. Many of the participants of the EXIT project were both residents and stakeholders.

We distinguish local administration and leadership from **policymakers**, who have the power to define and implement policies at the regional, national or European level; they have a broader territorial view, are acquainted with the interplay of systems of service, and policies.

This Guide also refers to concepts such as **policy areas**, **drivers of inequality**, and **social impacts**, which are direct outcomes of the EXIT research. The concept of ‘drivers of inequality’ refers to a set of factors that contribute, in various combinations, to creating and deepening inequalities, as they hinder the implementation or impact of policies. They can stem from administrative, financial, technical, and social issues. The concept of ‘social impact’ refers to the general, broad and flexible transformative effects produced by local communities’ actions. The concept is not a rigidly defined description of a specific result. These two concepts will be further described and discussed in sections 2 and 3 of this Guide.



Policy areas as defined by the project refer to seven clusters of basic services that recur in most debates around left behind areas, both in the policy and on the ground experiences.

1

Social services and health refer to the broad policy area connected with the provision of basic services aimed at restoring or keeping health, and services aimed at supporting specific vulnerable groups, such as foster care for children, home care for elderly, early childcare and other services for children with disabilities, personal assistance for persons with disabilities, centres for victims of violence, individual and family counseling, or supported living. In 'left behind areas', these services are often more difficult to access than in other areas (e.g., offices may have shorter opening hours or may be far away from the areas).

2

Formal and informal education refers to education and training offered formally by educational institutions, leading to a qualification, and informally by informal groups or associations, not leading to recognized formal qualifications. Formal and informal education is important in determining levels of human capital, influencing the economy and demography. In 'left behind areas' a vicious cycle is often highlighted where young people are pushed outward to attend higher education, while limited employment opportunities obstruct their return to the area. The lack of highly qualified human resources can limit opportunities for innovation and further reduce employment opportunities.

3

Employment and professional life are broad policy areas which are often considered on their own as an indicator of economic development or prosperity. Employment and professional life is a complex theme because it is deeply intertwined with demography, education, and social concerns. It's also interrelated with other economic factors such as the vitality, variety, and complexity of the economic structure of an area, which in turn is linked to innovation and development opportunities.

4

Community and social life refer to the level and quality of social interactions within an area, which in turn is related to the sense of belonging to a community and a place. These social features interact with the environmental, social, and institutional capital in the place, deeply influencing the perception of territorial inequality and the reaction to it. The EXIT project refers to the Robert Sampsons concept "Collective Efficacy" which is defined as the "... link between mutual trust, shared expectations among residents and willingness to intervene and interact and dependent on patterns of social interaction, social organization, and social control." (Sampson et al., 1997).

In some countries, community and social life are shaped by various phenomena such as migration, social differentiation, declining activism, or weakened community ties, which can increase territorial inequalities. It looks relevant that among the policy areas, this one seems to be the most invisible from the perspective of the policy framework and emerged only implicitly in the analysis of the factors driving inequalities. However, it is a highly sensitive area in the perceptions of local communities, and the analysis of the strategies underscored how strongly this factor emerges in a policy-relevant manner.

5

Housing, environment and regeneration is a broad policy theme that is treated differently in metropolitan or rural areas. This is due to the assumption that unaffordable housing is more of an urban issue than a rural one. However, rural areas suffer from a wide set of housing related issues, ranging from rising prices due to second homes and touristification, to challenges connected to deterioration and abandonment. Similar considerations are needed when looking at the environment at large, as pollution is usually concentrated in peripheral areas, where marginalized groups are often segregated. Discrimination and marginalization can also influence choices and connected policies for regeneration efforts.

6

Mobility and immobility refer to two policy areas, which are geographical (im)mobility and social (im)mobility. The first one relates to remoteness and lack of infrastructures, which is much discussed within policies on 'left behindness'; the second one refers to the already mentioned theme of outward migration, employment opportunities and education.

7

Digital inclusiveness refers to the ability to ensure equal accessibility to the digital domain, as many aspects of life have moved online, especially after the COVID pandemic. There are various factors that reduce accessibility, such as income, gender, age, and education, alongside uneven territorial distribution of digital infrastructure. On the other hand, the digitalization also offers some new opportunities to left behind areas, especially in relation to service distribution and the possibilities open by remote work, where digital exclusion may lead to other forms of exclusion and inequality.



2. FACTORS THAT CAUSE TERRITORIAL INEQUALITY

One of the first steps of the EXIT project was to analyze how left behindness is described and tackled by policies at the European and national level. In addition, through focus groups and questionnaires the project mapped the perceptions of residents, stakeholders and policymakers on the factors that contribute to creating inequality and/or to reduce the effectiveness of policies to counteract territorial inequalities. Through this process, it became evident that, although territorial inequalities remain a priority for policymakers at both European and national levels, policy outcomes have often been inconsistent. We observed that local actors sometimes express dissatisfaction, or even mistrust, towards policies implemented in the past.

It is a common civic interest to understand why these policies often do not produce the expected outcomes: firstly, citizens hold the right to question the decisions of policymakers, especially regarding public spending; secondly, because sometimes local communities have the right solutions needed to make these policies more effective. In this part, the Guide will provide some basic knowledge to understand how policies are designed and implemented. From this, it is possible to better understand the origin and effects of the drivers of inequality.

2.1 THE EFFECTS OF THE DRIVERS OF INEQUALITIES

The EXIT project, through the analysis of the existing gap between main policy frameworks and the perception of local communities and other stakeholders, has identified ten key drivers of inequality. These are processes, structures, habits, or even policies that contribute to creating inequality and reducing the effectiveness of policy interventions. In each context, these drivers interact in varying ways; not all are always present, and some may trigger or amplify others. Our study shows that predicting their combinations, interdependencies, and potential cascading or 'snowball' effects is highly challenging.

However, using these drivers to analyze the causes of territorial inequalities facilitates a more nuanced view of existing issues and responsibilities. This approach helps explain some of the reasons why policies may fail to achieve their intended impact, while identifying structural reforms or adjustments that could enhance effectiveness. It also informs practical planning measures to mitigate the influence of key drivers during each implementation phase.

1 The lack of policy framework to deal with the issue of territorial inequality (D1) refers to the lack of a clear policy framework at the level of policymaking and public administration. This leads to actions and measures that are not coherent, and sometimes to a short-term perspective on policy implementation, which reduces the effectiveness of investments. It is often coupled with the lack of dedicated institutions to coordinate, align policies, and support implementation.

Quote: "Allocating resources is not enough. It is crucial to provide all the necessary conditions to overcome marginalization"

(focus group participant, Italy)

2 Fragmented competences and vertical policy coordination gaps between different levels of government (D2) refers to the structural fragility of the political and administrative systems responsible for implementing strategic actions, especially along intersecting national-regional-local levels. This can contribute to competition among areas and may exacerbate challenges and obstruct the development of a comprehensive vision (D1, for example).

Quote: "There are examples of inter-municipal cooperation in our country, but collaboration is not promoted as a development tool from the national level, and there are no incentives provided to encourage the implementation of such cooperation."

(focus group participant, Serbia)

3 Weak collaboration and inter-agency (horizontal) cooperation in addressing territorial inequalities (D3) refers to the difficulties that reduce collaboration on the same level among different actors involved in a policy or strategy, such as public institutions, civil society organization and NGOs, private sector etc. The effect is similar to that of D2, but it happens especially at the local level (check also D10). For example, sometimes, funding calls, unintentionally, create competition rather than fostering collaboration. Participants from different areas emphasized the importance of collaborative, multi-agency approaches that actively involve citizens and civil society in addressing these challenges, while others underscored that national policies tend to prioritize economic growth, potentially overshadowing key factors contributing to territorial inequalities. It will be explained later how relevant this driver can be.

4 Inadequate funding systems and schemes targeting the local level (D4)

refer to the combined effects of the criteria and governmental priorities for funding allocation, and the requirements for local municipalities to access these funds. These requirements are often inadequate for the actual conditions and capacities at the municipal level. For example, certain national policies and interventions observed rely on per capita funding, which, in practice, prioritizes efficiency and leads to actions like school mergers and closures, without considering that small municipalities are required to fulfill the same obligations as larger administrative units but with significantly fewer resources available. In these cases, the funding criteria do not consider the fact that administrative costs and fixed expenses in the budget structure are substantially higher in small municipalities due to significant fixed costs. Similarly, sometimes the funds allocation is accompanied by guidelines and bureaucratic difficulties, including extensive paperwork and lengthy processes, that implicitly reduces application to municipalities with sufficient resources in terms of staff, knowledge, and skills to pursue funding opportunities or projects, with the result of worsening territorial inequalities (check D7).

Some participants have called for a different funding system for municipalities tailored to their local needs and the challenges they face.

*Quote: "May the national authorities grant us the freedom to utilize our resources and enjoy the revenues that legally belong to us. We require nothing more."
(focus group participant, Serbia)*

5 Population decline and changes in population structure leading to new demands and the role of the state (D5)

refers to the fact that common traits of 'left behind areas' such as population decline and changes in population structure necessitate new roles for the state and present new challenges, which increase the organizational burden on the administrative structure and requires a revision of existing policy frameworks. A widespread example raised in many of the areas is a vicious cycle where the increasing number of elderly individuals, coupled with declining birth rates, and the emigration of the working-age population, threatens the uniform provision of welfare services. In fact, unfavorable demographic trends not only reduce the municipality's economic capacity to sustainably meet the growing need for dependent services, but also diminish the demand for certain services due to a declining younger population. This, in turn, renders the provision of essential services, such as schools or daycare centers, too costly within the current service delivery models.

*Quote: "Areas suffering from depopulation are negatively affected by a vicious circle, so that the allocation of resources is based on a critical point that should be counteracted" (focus group participant, Italy); "Migration is initially a consequence of underdevelopment, and subsequently, it evolves into the cause of underdevelopment."
(focus group participant, Serbia)*

6 Optimizing the balance between policy centralization and decentralization (D6)

refers to the fact that both centralization and decentralization have the potential to foster territorial inequalities: centralization can result in uneven distribution of resources, economic imbalances, and inadequate attention to the specific needs of various territories, considering only one-size-fits-all indicators, such as the per capita allocation of funds. However, decentralization can also contribute to territorial inequalities when decision-making authority and resources are devolved to lower levels of government or local authorities which display unequal administrative capacity and/or resources. In this case, some may struggle to address their needs effectively, leading to disparities in service delivery, economic development, and infrastructure investment, thereby reinforcing territorial inequalities. The effectiveness of decentralization in reducing or exacerbating territorial inequalities depends on the implementation, capacity, and local governance structures (check D3 and D7).

Quote: "While decentralization emerges as a pivotal direction and solution, its effectiveness is crucial" (focus group participant, Serbia); "[...] it's almost easier to do proper projects with Slovenia, Hungary, than with Styria, Lower Austria [two federal states]."

(focus group participant, Austria)

7 Insufficient institutional capacities to effectively address the issue of territorial inequality (D7)

refers to the lack of skills within the institutions to effectively address issues or attract funding. As consistently reported across most countries, small municipalities highlight their insufficient resources to hire skilled professionals such as IT specialists, civil engineers, experienced lawyers, and public procurement experts. The challenge arises from the inability to attract these professionals due to the comparatively low salaries offered by the municipalities. Additionally, the overall quality of life and limited opportunities prompt skilled professionals to migrate to larger cities (check D8).

Quote: "We also require lawyers in our municipality, just as larger municipalities have."

(focus group participant, Denmark)

8

Geographical disparities in quality of life (D8)

refers to the ability to guarantee life quality, which is influenced by topography and geographical positioning. These factors significantly impact aspects such as inadequate transportation infrastructure, restricting residents' ability to reach essential services, employment opportunities, and educational facilities. Topography affects infrastructure development, contributing to disparities between regions. Economic opportunities, housing availability, and property values are also influenced by topography, impacting arable land, tourist areas, and housing space. Even the demographic composition of an area (such as a high proportion of Roma population) can lead decision-makers to overlook a specific place and neglect public investments or service provision.

Quote: "local communities lag behind as the municipal government prioritizes the interests of specific groups and economic entities rather than addressing the unique needs of the territory"
(focus group participant, Italy).

9

EU funding disparities and territorial inequality (D9)

refers to the different ways and policy requirements for local municipalities to access EU funding. These vary across different States, leading to uneven effects across EU Member States, and sometimes also vary within regions of the same State.

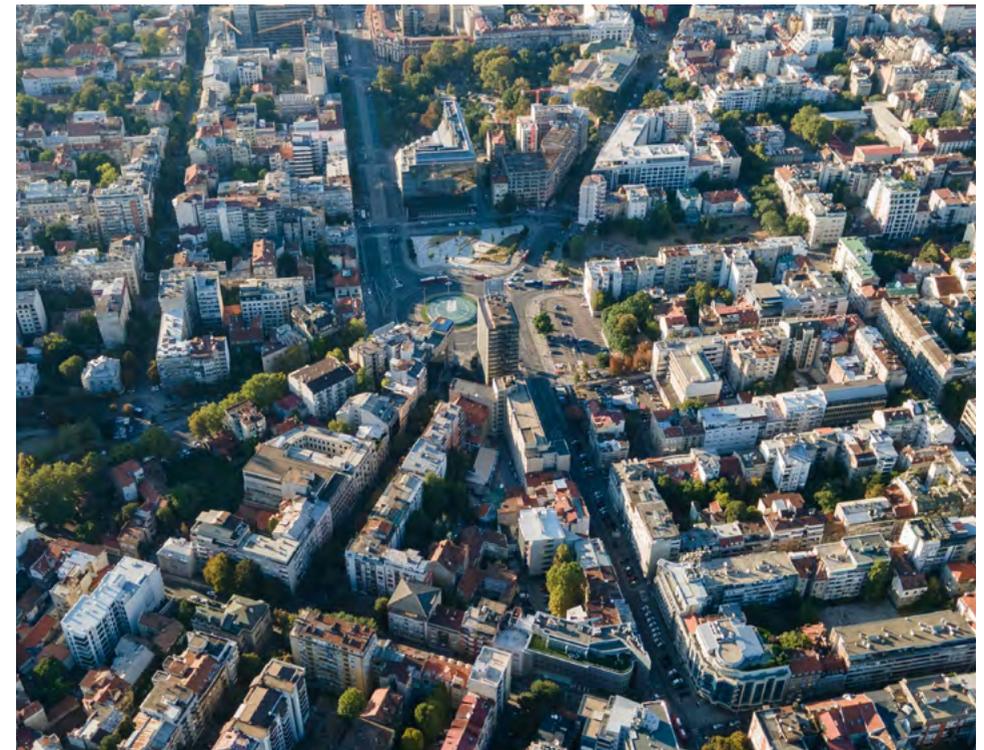
For example, Danish participants mention that Denmark may not be fully capitalizing on EU opportunities, particularly in relation to the EU's innovation support for large companies. Economic resources, knowledge, and capacities need to reach rural areas for development beyond relying solely on blue-collar workers and tourism. The "Just Transition Fund" by the European Commission should address the greatest challenges in achieving a climate-neutral transition by 2050. On the other hand, participants of the Italian focus groups emphasize the distinctive features of European policies compared to Italian policies. It highlights the planning and continuative nature of European policies. The key idea is that continuity is not only ensured for the seven-year programming cycle but also for subsequent cycles, as policies addressing critical factors require sustained and ongoing intervention. The conclusion drawn is that securing funding for the seven-year programming cycle of European funds is essential to ensure the continuity of interventions over time.

10

Fragmented social fabric and loss of connection between local communities and administration

As mentioned before, the level and quality of social interactions within an area deeply influences the perception of territorial inequality and the reaction to it.

If the local social fabric is fragmented, if local communities perceive a disinvestment from the State, or if there is lack of institutional support for local initiatives, a sense of helplessness and a feeling of being "left behind" can lead to disengagement by the local community, as they might perceive any effort as pointless. This withdrawal and loss of connection can be considered a driver of inequality in itself, as it reduces the efficiency of policies, while potentially undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions and processes.



To support readability, in the following text the drivers will be referred to by a shortened name and, occasionally a code, indicated in the table below.

Code	Name	Shortened name
D1	The lack of policy framework to deal with the issue of territorial inequality	lack of policy framework
D2	Fragmented competences and vertical policy coordination gaps between different levels of government	vertical policy coordination gaps
D3	Weak collaboration and inter-agency (horizontal) cooperation in addressing territorial inequalities	weak inter-agency horizontal cooperation
D4	Inadequate funding systems and schemes targeting the local level	inadequate funding system
D5	Population decline and changes in population structure leading to new demands and the role of the State	demographic changes
D6	Optimizing the right balance between policy centralization and decentralization	centralization-decentralization imbalance
D7	Insufficient institutional capacities to effectively address the issue of territorial inequality	insufficient institutional capacities
D8	Geographical disparities in quality of life	geographical disparities
D9	EU funding disparities and territorial inequality	EU funding disparities
D10	Fragmented social fabric and loss of connection between local communities and administration	social fragmentation and detachment

2.2 HOW TERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES ARE PERCEIVED BY LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The EXIT project has explored the effects and local perceptions of territorial inequalities through careful fieldwork analysis, thoroughly discussed in the EXIT “Comparative Report on Experiences and Perceptions of Territorial Inequalities”. As highlighted by the drivers, the effects of territorial inequalities on residents are shaped by interaction of the issues arising from more rigid and slow-to-adapt administrative structures, their analytical frameworks, and the effects caused by long-term transformations of socio-economic structures.

In fact, the fieldwork analysis demonstrates the impact of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007; Brenner *et al.* 2010) on the evolution and contraction of public policies pertaining to social services and health, education, employment and mobility have far-reaching consequences for everyday life. The process of peripheralization, whereby certain regions are systematically deprived of investment, infrastructure and policy support, has the dual effect of undermining local economies and deepening social inequalities. This can lead to feelings of abandonment and disenfranchisement. It is thus necessary to consider not only economic decline but also the socio-cultural dislocation experienced by communities that feel excluded from the benefits other citizens enjoy. This feeling becomes even more nuanced when looking at the everyday individual experience: the intersection of age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status has a significant impact on territorial inequalities.

It is often the case that women, ethnic minorities and low-income populations face multiple layers of disadvantage, which in turn limits their access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities. The need for an intersectional approach emerges as essential to address these compounded disadvantages, with policies and services tailored to the specific needs of marginalised groups.

Meanwhile, local resilience and the grassroots initiatives have shown to play a pivotal role in contrasting negative effects such as social fragmentation, depopulation and reduction in the sense of community, especially when robust networks of social services and community spaces are in place. This confirms that bolstering social infrastructure in under-resourced communities is pivotal for fostering resilience, as contended by Tomaney and colleagues (2024). The strategies mapped and evaluated during the EXIT project with a participatory approach show the ability of local communities to bridge gaps left by economic and governmental neglect. While the research reveals a growing disillusionment with representative democracy in some left-behind areas, as political systems seems to perpetuate inequalities by failing to address the needs of geographically marginalized populations (Crouch 2020), the analysis of impacts generated by local community strategies revealed that social impacts discussed in the following section often address multiple drivers simultaneously. This suggests that local communities not only have a perception of the drivers, but also of their interactions in a specific context: in other words, the knowledge of local communities is important to support policymakers to design better policies. However, this ability is not usually formally recognized and it's rare to find formal definitions and regulations for this collaborative role in legislative texts across Europe.

2.3 LACK OF GRASSROOTS RECOGNITION UNDERMINES POLICY SUCCESS

Policies, regulations and laws across Europe show a great variance in the level of recognition of the unique role of grassroots organizations and community-led activities in policymaking, and often seems to lack an adequate and appropriate recognition of the unique role and skills played by these actors.

The European Treaties explicitly acknowledge both citizens' democratic rights and the importance of involving representative organizations, noting that "institutions shall, by appropriate means, give citizens and representative associations the opportunity to make known and publicly exchange their views in all areas of Union action" and "maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society" (TEU, art.11, 1-2). In other legislative texts, such as the British "Public Service (Social Value) Act" (2012), the focus is on the need for public authorities to consider, protect and improve the economic, social and environmental well-being, when proposing a procurement. This approach highlights the existence of a common, general interest shared by public authorities and citizens, but in this case the responsibility is given to public authorities only.

The lack of recognition of an equally valuable policy role for grassroots organizations, contributing to a clear power imbalance between policymakers and civil society, poses the basis for a relevant shortcoming: the citizens have the right to be heard, but are not explicitly entitled to actively contribute to policy through their complementary role. In this way, the valuable freedom of action enjoyed by local communities and their specific ability to activate change towards social impacts is somehow wasted. This can be highlighted through some specific features connected to the reduced efficiency of co-programming mechanisms.

When co-programming mechanisms are framed simply as tools available to policymakers, it implies that administrations can choose whether or not to establish them. In this case, then it is likely that these mechanisms are unevenly used across the territory, creating a patchworked structure, both at the horizontal and vertical level. This could exacerbate vertical policy coordination gaps (D2) and geographical disparities (D8).

It is also probable that each mechanism will be organized around specific objectives and processes, designed and enforced by the professionals working for the administration, who may lean towards replicating the administrative structure, mindset, timetables, priorities. The administration is also likely to unilaterally define the co-programming table engagement rules.

This could open the door to arbitrary decisions, such as non-transparent selection and sidelining of relevant actors, and to a potentially non-inclusive cultural and organizational environment for local communities invited to contribute; it is necessary to underscore that some groups are more likely to be excluded than others. Moreover, administration-led tables usually tend to prioritize long-term, complex policy objectives, often leaving aside the need for local communities to have short-term solutions to their experience of inequality, and immediate rewards to sustain engagement and civic participation (Carrosio and Zabatino, 2022, p. 115). This is an especially important element related to volunteer-led participation: mechanisms organized around administrative timetables often do not allow for accommodation to facilitate volunteers who have other jobs. These features risk not only weakening trust within communities but also reducing political support for the bottom-up policy approach. The overall consequence is that the genuinely impactful contribution of grassroots organizations is overlooked: in the cases analyzed both by Carrosio and Zabatino (2022), and by the EXIT research, local actors and their networks are reinforced, strengthening their ability to cooperate horizontally, while long-term policy objectives aimed at reducing the drivers of inequality are not usually achieved.



3. THE IMPACTS GENERATED BY LOCAL CIVIC ACTORS

Local resilience and grassroots initiatives have been shown to play a pivotal role in counteracting negative effects such as social fragmentation, depopulation and a decline in community cohesion, especially when robust networks of social services and community spaces are in place. The strategies proposed and assessed during the EXIT project through a participatory approach demonstrate the capacity of local communities to fill gaps left by economic and governmental neglect.

While our research points to a deepening sense of disillusionment with representative democracy in left behind areas, the analysis of the impacts generated by local community strategies highlights the resilience of democratic practices when they are embedded in the lived realities of everyday life.

The third phase of the EXIT research was aimed at gathering already existing strategies or co-designing potentially useful strategies proposed by local communities and stakeholders to tackle territorial inequalities in their everyday life. This phase was structured as a **multi-level participatory process**, articulated through **three main types of workshops**, corresponding to different scales of action and dialogue: **resident participatory workshops at local level, country-level workshops involving residents and stakeholders, and a final international workshop bringing together representatives from all study areas.**

At local level, **resident and stakeholder workshops** provided spaces for participants to reflect on their lived experiences of territorial inequality and to propose concrete strategies rooted in local realities. These proposals were then discussed and further developed during the **Country Workshops**, where participants from the study areas within the same country collectively reviewed the strategies and selected those they considered the most relevant and effective. This process **resulted in the identification of a total of 38 strategies to combat territorial inequalities.** These strategies were subsequently brought to the **International Workshop**, where representatives from the case study areas analyzed them comparatively, focusing in particular on the **enabling and constraining factors affecting their transferability** across different territorial and institutional contexts.

This multi-level discussion provided deeper insight into how different drivers of territorial inequality interact in practice and helped to identify emerging policy priorities. In fact, many of the community-led strategies often address multiple drivers at the same time, reflecting a grounded understanding of how inequalities are produced and experienced locally. This suggests that local communities' rooted knowledge might be indispensable to map the negative effects of drivers, as well as to support policymakers to design better policies, structural changes or reforms.



3.1 THE SOCIAL IMPACTS: CONTEXTS, EFFECTS AND COMMON PROCESSES

The collected strategies present a high degree of variability, yet show some common features. Some are policy-driven and aim to adapt existing national policies to the specific context, while others are completely led by the communities, sometimes pointing out the absence of institutions. The concrete actions proposed differ in scope, thematic priority, complexity and participating networks, depending on the specific factors at play. However, it is possible to find a common basic structure made of “hooks and outcomes”.

Communities start from an insightful analysis of root causes and perceived needs, and a (sometimes implicit) mapping of available and potentially available resources, and obstacles. From there, each strategy proposes a concrete action, the hook, that responds directly to an urgent need. This indirectly generates a medium-term outcome by attracting attention and generating engagement within the community and/or institutions.

Even more interesting, the analysis of these 38 strategies suggests a convergence on only five impacts, which can respond to multiple drivers of inequality at once; some drivers are more often impacted than others.

1. To show pathways to reshape services delivery models to meet local needs within existent policy (I1)

This impact refers to the effect of closing the gaps between perceived needs and the ways public services are structured, at least partially. In the EXIT mapping, the strategies that reach this type of impact are common in contexts where the interactions of vertical policy coordination gaps (D2), inadequate funding systems (D4), demographic changes (D5), centralization and decentralization imbalance (D6), have led to public disinvestment, systemic neglect of existing structures, generating social fragmentation and detachment (D10).

In these cases, existing national policies and the ability to adopt a multi-actor approach at the local level are key resources. In the selected strategies, the local communities manage to use the available resources to implement national level policies re-structuring the service delivery to their own practical needs. This concrete action works as a hook towards the institutions, with the potential outcome of prompting various administrative levels and policymakers to reconsider and adapt the policy framework (D1). Stimulating a reflection on the issues related to the existence of vertical policy coordination gaps (D2) and inadequate funding systems (D4), providing guidance for a different analysis of the challenges posed by demographic changes (D5). Moreover, having efficient new delivery models could prompt a reconsideration of the existing balance between centralization and decentralization (D6). As a direct effect of the action, the community may see urgent needs handled appropriately.

For example, the Austrian strategy “Decentralized Health Network” and the Serbian “Expanding Elderly Care Services” used the existence of a national policy framework (Primary Health Care Strategy in Austria and Strategy for Deinstitutionalization in Serbia) to reinforce and restructure the delivery of local care systems. The Austrian case introduced a multiprofessional model of coordinated care operating across different locations, enhancing territorial accessibility. This helped to reduce the risks connected to demographic changes (D5) and imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6), while contributing to updating the existent policy framework (D1) and strengthening local inter-agency cooperation (D3). The Serbian case strongly relied on the strengthening of the local inter-agency cooperation (D3) to reach similar results, which would have been extremely difficult for policymakers to design and implement. It’s interesting to note that these strategies, through strengthening the local inter-agency cooperation, also contribute to the activation of impact 4 (‘Rebuild trust among local actors and with institutions’).

A different lesson can be learned from the Belgian strategy “Set up a community medical centre” where similar premises and potential impacts were reduced by the difficulty to attract general practitioners in the area, despite the support offered by the local administration. In this case, existing geographical disparities in quality of life (D8) played against the expected impact, as the offered conditions were not enough to alleviate the human resources limitations. This case illustrates that reduced impacts can raise doubts about feasibility *when structural solutions to address other drivers are absent*. However, it is important to emphasize that this represents a positive policy outcome: the strategy successfully revealed the influence of additional drivers. This insight can inform the design of complementary strategies or policy interventions to activate impact 2 (‘To show pathways to remove obstacles to local experiences’).

Impact 1: To show pathways to reshape services delivery models to meet local needs within existent policy					
Main drivers causing inequality	Other drivers potentially triggered by primary drivers	Available resources	Drivers contrasting the positive effects of strategies	Drivers reduced or exposed by the impact	Impacts potentially activated
Vertical policy coordination gaps (D2)	Fragmentation of social fabric and detachment between communities and administration (D10)	Existing national policies	Geographical disparities in quality of life (D8)	Lack of a coherent policy framework (D1)	To show pathways to remove obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish
Inadequate funding systems (D4)		Ability to activate horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)		Vertical policy cooperation gaps (D2)	To rebuild trust among local actors and with institutions
Population decline and changes in population structure (D5)		Skills and competences present in the community		Inadequate funding systems (D4)	
Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6)				Population decline and changes in population structure (D5)	
				Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6)	

2. To show pathways to remove structural obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish (I2)

As suggested by the Belgian case above, some drivers can obstruct the positive effects of interventions. For this reason, some of the 38 strategies are specifically designed to address drivers that hinder local initiatives. This impact usually intervenes where local actors perceive the absence of a support system to act locally, whether institutional, technical or financial (see the table below for reference to specific drivers).

In this case, the hook may take the form of a proposal, or call to action, to active entities in order to design and implement collaborative solutions to remove obstacles and unlock key resources. The existence of national frameworks, targeted funding, or technical knowledge within the network can help to establish a starting point for the strategy. Obviously, to achieve a positive outcome, drivers such as weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation, if present, should be reduced through targeted side actions.

Some examples of this impact are the Italian strategy “Helping Small Towns Get Access to Funding”, and the Serbian “Boosting Employment” strategy.

The first strategy targets the institutional weakness of small municipal administrations, whose offices struggle to navigate the complexity of national and EU funding procedures, leaving their territories unable to access development resources (D7). The proposed response is to create territorial development agencies to bring together project managers, accountants, and technical experts capable of unlocking external funding and managing strategic projects.

The second strategy addresses deep structural barriers to boosting employment, such as youth outmigration, low investment, and declining agriculture. It combines infrastructural development, entrepreneurship support, and sector-specific measures in both urban and rural zones, proposing a mix of investment incentives, SME support, agricultural modernization, and employment activation measures, involving a wide network of local actors within a national policy framework

This can be an important contribution to policymakers who need to adapt general policies to concrete contexts. This type of impact seems to be efficient both for creating bottom-up innovative solutions that can be integrated in wider policy frameworks, and for supporting the effective implementation of top-down policies on the ground. This could work especially well if the obstacles at the local level are appropriately mapped in the phase of policy design, and the local strategies solicited and supported as a part of the policy itself.

Impact 2: To show pathways to remove structural obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish

Main drivers causing inequality	Other drivers potentially triggered by primary drivers	Available resources	Drivers contrasting the positive effects of strategies	Drivers reduced or exposed by the impact	Impacts potentially activated
Lack of institutional support: 1) Lack of coherent policy framework (D1) 2) Vertical policy coordination gaps (D2) 3) Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation		Ability to sustain horizontal inter-agency cooperation (absence of D3)		Inadequate funding systems (D4)	It can support the activation or sustainability of all strategies and impacts
Lack of technical support: 1) Population decline and changes in population structure (D5) 2) Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6) 3) Insufficient institutional capacities at the local level (D7)		Existence of a national policy framework (absence of D1)		Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6)	
Lack of financial support: 1) Inadequate funding systems (D4) 2) Disparities in accessing EU funding (D9)				Insufficient institutional capacities at the local level (D7)	
Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6)				Population decline and changes in population structure (D5)	
				Imbalance between centralization and decentralization (D6)	

3. To re-state and reclaim residents' agency over their environment and the care for the social fabric in ways that are inclusive, visible and grounded in the local reality (I3)

This impact is often found in strategies aimed at tackling the negative effects of social fragmentation and detachment (D10), and weak horizontal cooperation (D3). It may also respond to the lack of policy frameworks able to include local communities as a meaningful actor of policy implementation, such as place-blind policies or strongly top-down policy implementation processes.

This impact is a strong game-changer, as it sets the basis for a generative and creative context coming from the acceptance of responsibility of the local community. This could valorize existing community assets through mutual sharing of resources, training and empowerment of residents, and transformation of space, especially in the case of regeneration strategies. Local administrations are called back to their role in a proactive way (in connection with impact I4, 'Rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions').

To achieve this impact, concrete hooks can vary greatly, going from physical regeneration of spaces to direct service delivery, from training activities to investments in arts, depending on available resources and perceived needs. Each action provides immediate material and psychological rewards for taking care of the environment and for the social fabric, thanks to the immediate and visible results generated. Outcomes generally focus on valuing local agency, emotional attachment to place, and shared stewardship, strengthening the positive perception of residing in the area. Through a pragmatic and resource-efficient model of regeneration, the final result is a transformation of the perception of disillusionment while helping residents to develop new skills and to grow aware of the power to challenge inequalities within the community.

Some good examples of this impact using physical regeneration as a hook are provided by Austria's "Community Hub with a Social Coordinator", Belgium's "Reopening Community Spaces", Italy's "Bringing Public Spaces Back to Life", Denmark's "Giving New Life to Empty Buildings" strategies. The same spirit of spatial and social reactivation can be found in the "Let's Beautify the Neighbourhood" strategy in San Isidro (Spain).

In the Austrian case, the combination of space and coordination stands out as an integrated model, seeking to institutionalize mechanisms for participation, as the social coordinator is tasked with weaving connections, supporting new initiatives, and maintaining long-term continuity. In Italy, the revitalization of abandoned public assets was tied to a broader symbolic and economic revitalization of the community. In both Murano and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, participants underscored how physical decay had become a visible sign of institutional neglect and collective demoralization.

When service delivery is used as the entry point, or hook, immediate support for urgent needs can trigger empowerment towards autonomy and responsibility. This process also helps build networks in which people in need can establish connections that extend beyond the immediate support received. Examples can be found especially around policy areas such as education, employment, and community and social life.

The Austrian "Inclusive Vocational Training" strategy places a strong emphasis on the social groups most likely to be excluded from employment: women with caregiving responsibilities, migrants facing language or qualification barriers, and young people disconnected from training pathways. It proposes tailored vocational routes combined with wrap-around support services and improved coordination between local actors, contrasting the negative effects of a weak horizontal cooperation (D3). Similarly, the UK strategy "Skills for the Future" aims to align training and education systems with the demands of emerging economic sectors, such as green technologies, digital services, and care work. By reimagining skills development as a future-oriented investment, this strategy seeks to rebuild a sense of purpose and aspiration among young people, bridging the disconnect between economic opportunity and lived experience. Importantly, it does so by involving local employers and institutions in the co-design of programs, helping to ensure that training leads not only to qualifications, but to actual prospects of stable, meaningful employment. In this way, the strategy contrasts two drivers, weak horizontal cooperation (D3), and social fragmentation and detachment (D10).

Focusing their work on hybrid spaces and community-led cultural initiatives, strategies such as Spain's "Revitalising El Punt Shopping Centre" and the UK's "Stronger Social Ties" reach the same impact. In Montcada i Reixac, the shopping centre becomes a vehicle for social gathering and youth engagement beyond economic activity, demonstrating how commercial infrastructure can be reimagined as a social commons; the UK proposal articulates a long-term process towards intercultural cohesion where to build trust and shared identity consistent investment in arts, dialogue, and youth leadership are required.

Depending on the context, this type of impact can contribute to exposing institutional absence, insufficient capacities, and other gaps, laying out the ground for further actions and strategies to be designed. In fact, it is crucial to highlight that these approaches are not meant to substitute public responsibilities, as all these examples, despite their effectiveness, are fragile experiences when lacking institutional scaffolding, access to funding, and technical support.

For policymakers, this impact can be valuable as the idea of co-responsibility emerges as essential, and the recognition of the value of hybrid models that combine top-down support with bottom-up initiative could set the basis for renewed policy approaches. However, to achieve this long-term transformation, a solid relationship between residents and institutions at various levels is a key resource. In fact, the analysis of strategies shows that the stronger the dialogue with other levels of institutions, the bolder the actions proposed by the communities.

Impact 3: To re-state and reclaim the residents' agency over their environment and the care for the social fabric in ways that are inclusive, visible and grounded in the local reality

Main causes of inequality	Other drivers potentially triggered by primary drivers	Available resources	Drivers contrasting the positive effects of strategies	Drivers reduced or exposed by the impact	Impacts potentially activated
Fragmented social fabric and/or detachment between local communities and administration (D10)		Physical spaces and neglected public assets	Geographical disparities in quality of life (D8) – especially in areas where population structure is composed by a share of marginalized groups	Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)	To show pathways to remove structural obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish
Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)		Skills, competences and material resources present in the community		Fragmented social fabric and/or detachment between local communities and administration (D10)	To show pathways to reshape service delivery models to meet local needs within existent policy
Lack of coherent policy framework (D1)		Feelings of belonging and emotional attachment to place		Insufficient institutional capacities at the local level (D7)	To rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions at various levels

4. To rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions at various levels (I4)

The loss of connection between residents and administration can become a strong driver of inequality, as pointed out by Wacquant with the concept of “advanced marginality” (2008), which entails a state of systemic neglect that perpetuates feelings of powerlessness and social isolation, draining the energy and motivation needed to handle the issues. There are many ways in which local communities may manifest this feeling, but in all cases the communication between institutions and the residents becomes difficult to initiate and maintain. The same can happen within the social fabric, for example when policy implementation exacerbates inequalities favoring some groups while damaging others (e.g. landlords against tenants), or when demographic structure shifts exacerbate cultural, economic, gender and age-based discriminations. In this context, the negative effects generated by social fragmentation and detachment (D10), and by weak horizontal cooperation (D3) might mutually reinforce the blocking of any possible strategy that aims to tackle other drivers.

For this reason, the impact lays an effective ground for a meaningful and powerful change, allowing for renewed civic participation, and for a strengthened administrative role in the area. In fact, other drivers can be highlighted and eventually reduced (check the table for details), preparing the area for activation of other impacts aimed at removing obstacles and reshaping service delivery. This may be an explanation for the considerable number of strategies where this impact emerges, across various policy areas, such as Education, Environment, housing and regeneration, and Mobility and immobility.

Actions serving as hooks can be varied, depending on urgent needs considered primary cause of detachment, but all involve an advocacy effort to engage institutions, stakeholders and citizens in a shared responsibility-taking. These strategies display a common call for reciprocity, recognition and follow-through, clarifying which actor should take the lead and who's responsible for what. Advocacy competences, team-building and cooperation skills emerge as key resources, together with existing policies, which can serve as a starting point.

Outcomes can be more or less effective, as not all the institutions and stakeholders actually engage. However, even a negative outcome can be considered a policy success, as it can help to uncover a political attitude or administrative frailty, setting the basis for actions towards targeting these obstacles. In most successful cases, strategies lead to the establishment of effective cooperation laying the ground for future co-design of interventions.

Actions based on a collaborative approach can be found in the Greek strategy “Safe and Accessible Schools”, where residents and teachers identified the poor physical state of schools as a major concern and introduced a formalized, cyclical mechanism for inspecting and upgrading school buildings, with clear criteria for prioritization and a focus on bioclimatic and inclusive design. Similarly, the strategy “Clean City with Shared Responsibility” from Pyrgos (Greece) focuses on improving waste management, framed as a shared responsibility involving institutions, schools and residents.

A strong advocacy approach is adopted by the San Isidro strategy “Holding the AVS Accountable”, seeking to formalize civic pressure towards the regional housing agency responsible for deteriorating public housing, through the establishment of collective mechanism that can negotiate, monitor and advocate for decent housing conditions. Even more ambitious, in Montcada i Reixac, the strategy “Enforcing Environmental Responsibility” scaled up environmental responsibility to target large polluting companies, calling for recognition of the municipality’s environmental burden calling for redistribution of responsibility, visibility, and resources. An interesting case is represented by the Danish strategies “Making Rural Transport Easier to Use” and “Investing in Fair Rural Transport”, where the pathway through volunteering is rejected to advocate for stronger public investment. In fact, looking at mobility, participants rejected informal or volunteer-based ride-sharing schemes as unsafe, exclusionary, and ethically problematic, drawing a clear boundary between citizens’ role and the duties of the State. Similarly, the Serbian strategy “Improving Mobility” calls for road reconstruction, enhanced intra-municipal connectivity and subsidies for vulnerable groups, reinforcing the idea that mobility is a public responsibility.

Finally, two strategies involved institutions beyond the local level, pushing for the reconfiguration of regional flows: the UK “Better Transport” addresses both internal deficiencies and links to major urban centres, showing that mobility inequalities are relational, shaped by the ability (or inability) to reach regional labour markets, services and opportunities. A similar approach is found in the Greek strategy “Mobility for All”.

This impact has relevant policy effects. It should be underscored that the call to the administration is articulated in a proactive, positive, and cooperative way. Even when strategies involve contesting policies and politicians, they also reaffirm the role of each actor within the democratic system and acknowledge the central position of institutions, thereby strengthening both democratic procedures and institutional legitimacy. Moreover, this impact contributes to highlighting other drivers such as vertical policy coordination gaps (D2), weak horizontal cooperation (D3), inadequate funding systems (D4), while contributing to tackle directly the negative effects of demographic changes (D5) and of geographical disparities (D8).



Impact 4: To rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions at various levels

Main causes of inequality	Other drivers potentially triggered by primary drivers	Available resources	Drivers contrasting the positive effects of strategies	Drivers reduced or exposed by the impact	Impacts potentially activated
Fragmented social fabric and/or detachment between local communities and administration (D10)		Advocacy competences		Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)	All impacts that use trust and cooperation of local actors and with institutions as a key resource
Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)		Team building skills		Fragmented social fabric and/or detachment between local communities and administration (D10)	
Systemic neglect by State administration		Feelings of belonging and emotional attachment to place		Geographical disparities in quality of life (D8)	
				Vertical policy coordination gaps exposed (D2)	
				Inadequate funding systems exposed (D4)	
				Population decline and changes in population structure exposed (D5)	

5. To bridge the gap between institutional spaces and wider social fabric (I5)

This impact refers to the ability to involve the local echelons of institutions in a stronger inter-agency cooperation with the local social fabric. Schools, public offices, health care centers, and the people who run them, when defunded and neglected by the upper echelons of the public institutions they represent, can be seen as victims of territorial inequalities themselves (let's think of small schools that resist in remote areas despite investment cuts and low personnel numbers). Sometimes, however, there are cultural, linguistic, and social gaps between them and the local community they are meant to serve and with whom they share the experience of inequality, which hinder a potential alliance. This impact is a very specific declination of the previous one, but one worth mentioning, because when communities manage to involve institutions into the social fabric, they access new resources, such as buildings, human resources, and institutionalized channels to dialogue with other institutional levels. This is why this impact can be a pre-condition for change in any direction.

These strategies build on hooks which can offer support to, and motivate, the personnel working in these structures while responding to concrete needs of the population. This leads to the activation of local institutions as powerful allies in a stronger horizontal cooperation (D3) for the development of strategies aimed at designing new models of service delivery (impact 1), as vocal advocates in the call for investments and re-claiming the role of the State (impacts 2 and 3), and strengthening trust between communities and institutions (impact 4).

An example of this specific impact is the San Isidro strategy "Schools Connected to the Neighbourhood", which addresses the lack of connection between schools and surrounding neighbourhoods, transforming schools into open, participatory hubs, capable of anchoring educational processes in the life of the community (contributing to reshaping service delivery models). This involves building a stable alliance between schools, families, associations and local actors, and jointly developing activities that foster territorial belonging, intergenerational exchange and collaborative responsibility (contributing to re-stating and reclaiming residents' agency). Another interesting example is Italy's "Listening Spaces" strategy, which revolves around the repurposing of municipal rooms to create informal civic contact points, accessible to those who may feel excluded from digital or bureaucratic channels, also suggesting a pathway to reshaping service delivery models. This initiative underscores the participatory nature of the democratic process, where citizens claim their right to voice their perspective and being heard, highlighting the need for involvement in the decision-making process starting from a new alliance with the local institutional space.

Impact 5: To bridge the gap between institutional spaces and wider social fabric

Main causes of inequality	Other drivers potentially triggered by primary drivers	Available resources	Drivers contrasting the positive effects of strategies	Drivers reduced by the impact	Impacts potentially activated
State neglect of local echelons of institutions	Fragmentation of social fabric and detachments between local communities administration (D10)	Institutional spaces	Fragmentation of social fabric and detachments between local communities administration (D10)	Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)	To rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions at various levels
Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3)		Advocacy skills, competences and material resources present in the community		Fragmented social fabric and/or detachment between local communities and administration (D10)	All other impacts as this impact may unlock various resources
				Insufficient institutional capacities at the local level (D7)	

4. HOW TO SUPPORT LOCAL ACTORS AND INTEGRATE THEIR KNOWLEDGE IN POLICY DESIGN

One of the questions addressed by EXIT is whether strategies developed by local communities can be transferred to other areas. It is true that each concrete strategy strictly depends on the context: the main drivers causing inequality and their interactions, the existing resources and the specific needs perceived by the community. However, it may be argued that strategies and impacts can be replicated elsewhere by applying a general design framework across different actions, thus producing comparable results.

This is the key feature which makes grassroots initiatives an indispensable resource in policymaking: the ability to trigger recognizable pathways to change adapted to each concrete context.

To explore the transferability of grassroots strategies, during the International Workshop the participants from the case study areas were asked to analyze which factors would enable or obstruct the implementation of the 38 selected strategies in their own area. The participants, divided into two groups, showed a strong alignment in their perception elaborating two very similar maps, containing six factors of transferability:



The first transferability factor points to elements which pertain to the administrative and policymaking institutions: the lack/presence of a coherent policy framework (D1) and to the existence of vertical policy coordination gaps (D2), together with policymakers' political sensibility towards solving territorial inequalities. The second and third factors correspond to the reaction of administrations and policymakers towards territorial characteristics, such as demographic changes (D5) and geographical disparities (D8). Thus, these four drivers can be highlighted as especially sensitive. To orient policy work towards tackling them could play an important role in enhancing the ability of local communities to counteract territorial inequalities.

The last three factors can be grouped in the broad category “sustainable resource system” underlying the need to access material, financial, administrative, political and human resources, including skills. As already mentioned, drivers such as weak horizontal cooperation (D3) and social fragmentation and detachment (D10) are especially volatile factors in the development of territorial inequalities, as they reduce cooperation, thus hampering the ability to access existing resources. At the same time, the factor concerning the “attitude of local governance and leadership” highlights the limited recognition granted to grassroots initiatives as meaningful policy actors. Pointing out this aspect, EXIT participants underscore the perception of subordination stemming from power imbalance as a source of uncertainty.

In the “Cross-national report on strategies and practices” the EXIT research highlighted that: “[...] territorial inequalities require integrated, multi-dimensional solutions that combine policy reforms, community-driven initiatives, and technological advancements. Public investment in healthcare, education, housing, and transport must be coupled with grassroots activism and digital innovations to ensure long-term impact. The most successful strategies involve local adaptation of national policies, ensuring that solutions are tailored to the specific needs of each region. By fostering collaboration between governments, private sectors, and communities, European municipalities can build more inclusive, resilient societies where access to services, opportunities, and social cohesion is not determined by geography or economic status. Through continued investment and innovation, territorial inequalities can be gradually diminished, ensuring that all European citizens have equal opportunities to thrive” (p.10).

This ideal “golden recipe” seeks to strengthen the sustainability of community-led activities and identify improved practical mechanisms for combining policy action with grassroots initiatives, addressing the main shortcomings outlined in Section 2.3.



4.1 DESIGNING COHERENT POLICY FRAMEWORKS THAT EFFECTIVELY INVOLVE LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The role of a coherent policy framework in addressing territorial inequalities through a sustainable, long-term effort, emerged in a new light following the analysis of the local community strategies. In fact, the ability of grassroots to map existing or potential interactions between drivers suggests that to be effective both in the short and long term, policy frameworks should also include some kind of coordination systems. These could flexibly address the multiple dimensions and manifestations of the State's withdrawal from left-behind areas by leaving space for tailored adaptations and integrations by bottom-up, community-led activities.

This however tends to be obstructed by various factors, including differences of approaches, languages, and priorities among different actors. These differences often emerge also within the formal process proposed by the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) scheme, where communities sometimes find it difficult to recognize social impacts on the policy level. In fact, they might find it challenging to identify, assess, describe, and quantify this type of long-term important results, which are so deeply embedded in everyday life and perception. At the same time, it may also be difficult for policymakers to recognize the concrete policy value of abstract feelings like 'care for the social fabric' or 'trust among local actors and institutions'.

Appropriate indicators for measuring social impact might represent another challenge: some of the relevant aspects of the discussed impacts can't easily be measured with quantitative indicators. Mistrust can be generated around administrators' fears of potential funding misuse by local actors.

Adopting an impact-oriented planning of interventions that involves also psychological and perception-based results in project evaluation grids could effectively ease the mistrust and disconnection between the State and the marginalized territories, encouraging people to activate their energy, competences, attitudes, and time towards a common result.

4.2 PRACTICAL TIPS ON HOW TO VALORIZE LOCAL COMMUNITIES' UNIQUE CONTRIBUTIONS

One of the most difficult aspects in tackling territorial inequalities is the variability of areas, territorial features, cultural background, national administrative and legal structures, individual experiences of inequalities and interactions of drivers. Local administrators, regional and national level policymakers would relate differently with each point. The practical tips proposed below should be seen as general considerations coming from the overall EXIT research experience, that could provide inspiration, suggest pathways, and highlight already-existing examples.

The overall structure is built starting from basic, occasional or short-term interventions, and leads to the design of a potential multi-level multi-agent circular co-programming mechanism to be run long-term. Some aspects are inspired by the lived experience of EU level mechanisms for consultation (as the Have Your Say platform) and co-programming tables, which exist under many different EU Commission DGs. Others are informed by the EXIT research and existing national mechanisms. Each of the following suggestions could be tested in practice independently from the others. Overall, the proposed system could be adjusted to concrete contexts and, perhaps more importantly, used to inform a collective discussion about tools and mechanisms to ensure greater civic participation in counteracting territorial inequalities.



1

Using the knowledge provided by the EXIT project to look at policies from a different perspective

A first policy priority could be to conduct an analysis of the context to identify the political, legal and organizational elements which contribute to the manifestation of the drivers. Mapping these elements could help to detect specific interactions and suggest accurate goal-oriented interventions. It could be useful to prioritize drivers such as vertical coordination gaps (D2), weak inter-agency cooperation (D3), demographic changes related issues (D5) and geographical disparities (D8), which were underscored as slightly more relevant for transferability of local communities' strategies. A second practical suggestion would be to set in place some type of consultation tool to integrate the analysis with residents' perceptions. The preferred tool depends on the type of territory and relationship with the residents, accessible digital infrastructure, and available resources. As a general consideration, a short, clear questionnaire based on the descriptions of drivers could prove effective at different levels, providing valuable information and being relatively easy to manage. Consultation tools like the Have your Say platform can be implemented digitally, but also as a more accessible "Suggestion Box", or even physically, as suggested by the strategy "Listening Spaces" (discussed in relation to impact 5). The value of these tools, however, can depend on the presence or not of other tools for dialogue allowing for two-way messaging: During the country workshop, EXIT participants stated that they found the tool effective as a complementary measure for providing quick updates to citizens. They emphasized that it should be used alongside other channels that allow citizens to voice their concerns and proposals directly.

In case of contexts where in-person multi-agency interaction is considered safe and relevant, community meetings, or stakeholders' meetings at higher levels, could set a first step towards enhancing mutual trust and engagement. In this case, inviting professional figures to mediate between administrators, policymakers and the local community could smoothen the dialogue, navigate intra-community conflicts and provide a more accurate mapping of principal obstructing factors. If possible, interesting profiles for this task would be personnel with a background in civil society or with long-term experience in co-programming mechanisms. Of course, it would be advisable to avoid this type of tool in case of conflictual communities, where the effects of drivers weak cooperation (D3) and fragmented social fabric and detachment (D10) are strong. In this case, it could be useful to find some local actors willing to work towards the achievement of impact 4 'to rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions at various levels'.

2

Empowering grassroots networks, forums of local administrators and associations to scaffold the inter-agency collaboration

The EU level co-programming tables highlight the ability of umbrella associations, networks and forums in coordinating horizontally and providing community-rooted insights in policy design and implementation at the highest level. These networks are also usually able to coordinate vertically within their own structure, providing capillary bottom-up information gathering and offering practical support to implementation of top-down recommendations, plans and guidelines.

This example suggests that policies able to empower this type of entities towards a similar set of activities could prove very effective in scaffolding inter-agency collaboration, connecting territories with similar experiences, and providing policy briefs and bottom-up recommendations to higher administrative levels.

To do this, local communities and echelons of grassroots organizations could be empowered to continue performing their self-chosen activities, aligned with needs, intuitions, and individual and community time and resources available. As mentioned, the locally implemented strategies are fragile unless resources, administrative support and recognition are granted. This empowerment could be achieved by establishing small-sum, easy to manage funding schemes, with minimal or no conditions attached. Providing special habilitation to use or regenerate public spaces for community activities could also facilitate many of the strategies that require social gathering.

As shown by many of the strategies mapped by EXIT, individual empowerment lays the groundwork for community empowerment, consistent with Zimmermann's (2000) argument. As community-led formal and informal networks can provide exchange of resources, training and mutual learning, allowing for a capillary support net which can empower residents to be active citizens in ways that are coherent with individual life projects, skills, interests and immediate needs. From a policy perspective, it can be argued that this contribution has paramount importance, as 'civic participation' has emerged in our mapping as an infrastructure, more than a simple social activity. More than keeping the civic infrastructure healthy, these local networks can provide bottom-up practical knowledge built with a test-and-error approach: each strategy can be considered an 'acupuncture prototype' (Lerner 2014), which provides grounded knowledge and innovative pathways to policies in ways that are efficient, low-cost and low-risk.

3

Giving local communities and grassroots organizations proper recognition as autonomous policy actors

The Italian law 'Codice del Terzo Settore' (Code of Third Sector, or CTS, law n. 117/2017) provides inspiration for bringing the previous point a step further. In a national context traditionally animated by a flourishing non-profit sector which performs a relevant role in almost any policy area, the Code enshrined the legal right for non-profit civil society organizations to be involved by the public administration and contribute to policy programming with a formalized role. The law recognizes the non-profit sector as complementary to public authorities, as both take care of and support the achievement of the 'general interest', introducing a two-tiered policy recognition. The law made it mandatory for public authorities to actively involve the non-profit sector in policymaking and implementation, making them an interlocutor standing on an equal dignity level and ensuring the enjoyment of specific rights. On the other hand, it assigns organizations a type of duties concerned with information gathering, civic engagement, top-down communication and bottom-up activation. A concrete application of this recognition is represented, for example, by the introduction of regulations to provide administrative support to non-profit organizations involved in the regeneration of public spaces, broader in comparison to any other actor. These new regulations have directly increased the ability of grassroots organizations to perform strategies similar to those proposed by the EXIT mapping, streamlining the collaboration process already mentioned. On the other hand, the non-profit sector is required to embrace more detailed transparency requirements, and take on a more formal role with the duty to provide some indicators to prove strategy effectiveness. Interventions are co-designed with clearer tasks assigned to each actor, and boundaries are formally established to support and defend different institutional mandates and competences. In this way cooperation can be streamlined and intensified. Within this context, grassroots networks are also automatically empowered to perform a stronger and more demanding role in scaffolding the inter-agency cooperation at all levels, increasing the activity of maintaining the civic participation infrastructure at all levels.

As a final consideration, the law and its effects seem to be coherent with the already mentioned EU co-programming structure, where 'umbrella organizations' play a very similar role and receive similar recognition. This approach can inspire appropriate adaptations in different national contexts, either starting at the local level of territorial inequalities by supporting a horizontal scaffolding across different territories, or using already existing networks at regional or national levels to test potential implementation at lower levels.

4

Designing a common general framework consistent at the national level and flexible at the local level

This suggestion is also inspired by the Italian Code of Third Sector: the law makes it mandatory to involve non-profit entities in policy co-programming, thus the establishment of co-programming mechanisms becomes indispensable. Even if the law indicates general rules for the establishment of these mechanisms and actors' engagement at the national level, interestingly, it takes territorial inequalities into account providing the possibility for each administrative body to tailor the general structure, exact functioning and engagement rules to their concrete context. For example, a local administration could expand the engagement rules to invite relevant local actors that lack basic formal requirements. Even if these entities enjoy reduced benefits, their involvement contributes to ensuring effective representation of informal networks, minorities or communities even if these lack organized networks. The same flexibility is found in the definition of the concrete roles and duties of convened actors, ideally setting the basis for an equal and collaborative cooperation built on context-bound needs, resources, competences and objectives.

Looking at this framework while considering the shortcomings of classical co-programming tables mentioned in section 2, we can highlight an even more interesting feature: the law is leading to a joint effort between public and non-profit sectors at all levels to co-design tailored co-programming mechanisms. While this is currently requiring an intensive work and practical experimentations from both sides, this long-term reform process is positively impacting the ability of local communities and networks of performing their everyday tasks, as mentioned in the first point. It already provides more effective tools for cooperation with local administrations and it's somehow supporting the efforts towards a stronger infrastructural civic participation also in areas characterized by territorial inequalities.

In fact, at present, the system is still under construction, meaning that implementation is patchworked across territories, and the uptake is more consistent at the national and regional levels than at local levels, but training for local communities is a wide-spread activity, speeding up communities' empowerment.

5

Design a circular multi-level multi-agency collaboration structure, made of core institutionalized mechanisms surrounded by less rigid pathways to horizontal and vertical cooperation

The ideal landing of this type of policy reforms could be the design of a circular multi-level multi-agency collaboration structure, made up of core institutionalized mechanisms surrounded by less rigid pathways to horizontal and vertical cooperation, adapted to the characteristics and capacities of different levels.

The mandatory nature of the co-programming mechanisms could allow for the creation of a densely woven network of territorial, inter-territorial, provincial, regional and national mechanisms, coordinated vertically by both the administrative structure and the grassroots structures. These associations, networks and forums could be enabled to fulfil a unique role in training their own members, ensuring proper knowledge of the territories and equipping their representative with appropriate technical competences to effectively contribute to the achievement of policy objectives, while keeping their support of local communities' work.

The continuous interactions across levels could help to streamline and unburden mid-level co-programming mechanisms around four main tasks. The first one is to monitor local strategies, mapping the most interesting and promising, working to design pilot-testing on broader territory, and maximizing the knowledge produced at the local level. The second one is to provide policy and technical guidance, and financial support, to ensure that successful strategies can develop in a sustainable way, be transferred to other similar contexts, and inspire the design of similar approaches. The third one is to timely transmit policy implementation plans in order to involve local communities, by asking them to contribute with feedback and by designing specific actions to tailor policy implementation to their unique context. The fourth task is to use the practical knowledge to find administrative and political obstacles to the effectiveness policies, in order to explore more efficient policy pathways to counteract territorial inequalities.

FINAL REMARKS

The findings that underpin this Guide are grounded in community voices and local experiences offering a diversity of perspectives on how territorial inequalities are lived and perceived. By connecting these insights with policymaking processes, the Guide provides a **practical lens for interpreting complex inequalities and identifying avenues for action.**

Across the communities included in this study, a recurring concern is the perceived withdrawal of the State from addressing territorial inequalities. Where public support is limited, local initiatives often fill gaps, yet these efforts cannot replace institutional responsibility. The Guide emphasizes the **urgent need for public frameworks that actively enable local communities to participate in reducing inequalities**, supported by mechanisms that are inclusive, flexible, and responsive to local realities.

The consultation structure proposed in this Guide presents a **practical, though aspirational, model** for fostering dialogue and cooperation between citizens and administrations. While its full implementation may face challenges, meaningful steps can be taken by **adapting and reinforcing existing mechanisms**, promoting coordination across levels of government, and embedding principles of **diversity and inclusion** throughout public cooperation processes.

The relevance of generative, participatory approaches is critical in understanding how public policies can engage communities effectively. As Minervini (2016, p.15-6) points out, generative politics should be understood as *"A platform that, using sense as a trigger, helps people to activate, and thus, in relation, with their capital of energy and skills, passions and time. [...] The precondition is that politics has to re-think itself in service to active, conscious people more than to passive consumers. Public policies become efficacious if they are thought of as social change processes, with governable but not predictable, outcomes."* Participatory approaches can **enhance the capacity of public policies to mobilize local skills and foster social change, moving beyond top-down interventions.**

As this Guide highlights, territorial inequalities can be addressed not only as structural challenges but also as opportunities to strengthen participatory governance and locally grounded solutions. Public policies that actively mobilize community capacities and knowledge can be both responsive and sustainable. By centering local actors as partners rather than passive recipients, governance can transform entrenched inequalities into avenues for inclusive development.

REFERENCES

- Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways. *Global Networks*, 10(2), 182–222. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00277.x>
- Carrosio G., Zabatinò A. (2022). I dispositivi abilitanti per una politica di sviluppo *place-based*. In book: *L'Italia Lontana. Una politica per le aree interne*, ed. S. Lucatelli, D. Luisi, F. Tantillo. Donzelli.
- Crouch, C. (2020). *Post-democracy after the crises*. John Wiley & Sons
- European Union, Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union [2016] OJ C 202/21, art.11, consultable at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_11/oj/eng.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Lerner, J. (2014). *Urban Acupuncture. Celebrating Pinpricks of Change that Enrich City Life*, Island Press, Washington-Covelo-London.
- Minervini, G. (2016). *La politica generativa. Pratiche di comunità nel laboratorio Puglia*. Carocci, Roma.
- Parliament of the Italian Republic, Decreto Legislativo 3 luglio 2017, n. 117, (GU n.179 del 02-08-2017 - Suppl. Ordinario n. 43), consultable at <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2017/08/02/179/so/43/sg/pdf>
- Parliament of the United Kingdom, UK Public General Acts, Public Service (Social Value) Act, [2012], c. 3, art. 3, consultable at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3>
- Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277(5328).
- Tomaney, J., Blackman, M., Natarajan, L., Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, D., Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, F., & Taylor, M. (2023). Social infrastructure and 'left-behind places.' *Regional Studies*, 58(6), 1237–1250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2224828>
- Zimmerman, M. A. 2000, Empowerment Theory. Psychological, Organizational and Community Level of Analysis, in *Handbook of Community Psychology*, ed. J. Rappaport e E. Seidman, Kluwer Academic-Plenum Publishers, New York.

EXIT

Exploring Sustainable
Strategies to Counteract
Territorial Inequalities from
an Intersectional Approach

WANT TO LEARN MORE?



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or REA. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. Project Number: 101061122

