



LOCAL COMMUNITIES' GUIDE

Left behindness contested:

Place, power and pathways to change

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



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

So called “left-behind areas” have become a core issue in many EU and national policies, but these policies have shown mixed results. People living in left-behind territories often feel they have been neglected by the state for decades, a sense of abandonment that contributes to accelerating depopulation trends. Depopulation and civic disenfranchisement in turn reduce the advocacy effectiveness of civil society networks towards local administrations and policymakers to counteract territorial inequalities, heightening the risks connected with state withdrawal. This results in a cycle of decline and eroding trust. Despite these challenges, many community leaders and grassroots networks have been exploring ways to counteract territorial inequalities, often with relevant policy results that bring immediate relief to urgent everyday needs. However, these are often represented as short term responses, as practices with negligible policy impact, or non-transferable, context-dependent social innovation strategies.

The EXIT project focuses on 17 left-behind areas in 8 European countries. Applying a rigorous ethnographic research approach as well as community-based participatory activities the project has identified a list of drivers of territorial inequalities, perceived needs of local communities, and key roles played of civil society actors. Local communities identified 38 bottom-up strategies as highly transferable.

The results show that local communities – composed of civil society, local administrators and private sector stakeholders – possess key situated knowledge to develop bottom-up approaches that are highly efficient. The research highlights that civil society actors can play an important role bridging local communities and policymakers. However, local communities often underestimate their potential role in shaping policy, while civil society organisations lack accessible, scientifically validated tools to structure effective strategies to involve disengaged residents. Furthermore, many civil society actors themselves see their approaches as tailored specifically to the often very particular context they work in. This can evoke a sense of exceptionalism that reduces the ability to reach out to or exchange insights with other organisations working on similar issues, whilst it may also hinder the ability to benefit from existing national policies.

Our guide provides a set of recommendations for:

- 1) **Assessing** local needs and desired social impacts within a common framework based on the list of ‘drivers of territorial inequalities’;
- 2) **Using** general research-based knowledge on policy and policymaking processes to integrate the local context analysis within a national perspective;
- 3) **Adopting** an ‘hook-to-outcome’ strategy to design tailored social impact-oriented strategies within a common framework, to increase transferability, strengthen the ability to describe long-term impacts in a policy-wise way, thus strengthening the value recognition for policy-makers;
- 4) **Engaging** in the debate on the protection of civic space and on the recognition of the policy role played by civil society actors within local communities.

INTRODUCTION

EXIT (Exploring sustainable strategies to counteract territorial inequalities from an intersectional approach) brings together seven universities and four civil society organizations from eight European countries. Our shared goal is to understand and address the socioeconomic inequalities that affect areas often described as 'left behind'. This is a label we look at critically throughout this project. Working side by side with people living and working across 17 study areas in Europe, we have listened carefully to everyday experiences, trying to understand how factors like gender, age, and migration status shape what life looks and feels like in these places. Using research methods rooted in local realities, especially ethnography, we explore seven policy areas where people may experience territorial inequalities in their everyday lives: social services and health; education; employment; community and social life; housing and environment; mobility; and digital inclusiveness. Based on this, EXIT identifies practical solutions to territorial inequalities and shares what works across communities and countries.

The findings in this Guide come directly from community voices, gathered through our research. This way, the Guide aims to bridge the gap between what communities live through and how policies are made. What our research shows is that communities are most concerned about one thing: the withdrawal of the State. In many places, inequality is felt not only as a material reality, but also as being shut out of economic, social, and civic life. There is an urgent need for public frameworks that genuinely support communities in taking action and reducing inequality together.

Our research shows that communities are not passive recipients of policy. They are political actors with real power and tools to push for broader engagement from governments at every level. Civil society organizations play a crucial role here, building networks that enable mutual learning and exchange across territories and administrative boundaries.

That said, many people involved in EXIT raised an important concern: volunteering, common in many grassroots strategies, is a double-edged sword. Volunteers are a vital resource, but in places where public investment is low, they can end up filling gaps that the State should be covering, essentially managing basic services on their own. When that happens, volunteering stops being a strength and starts being a sign of abandonment. Even the most motivated local actors cannot replace the State, which remains the most powerful player needed for sustainable local development. At the same time, the State often lacks the on-the-ground knowledge needed to support lasting change at the community level. This can sometimes unintentionally block the transfer of successful approaches from one place to another. This happens through too rigid bureaucratic systems, inadequate funding channels, and a general failure to recognize the value of local community efforts. What is needed is genuine cooperation across governance levels, where higher up decision makers have real access to place based knowledge and experience.

This Guide serves that purpose. It shares EXIT's research findings to inform local understanding and action, support policy development that includes local knowledge and experiences, and improve communication between communities and governance actors.

This Guide was built from the ground up. Throughout the EXIT project, researchers worked closely with local organizations, residents, and stakeholders in each of the 17 study areas, gathering not only data but also lived experience, strategies, and ideas that communities had already put into practice. The Guide is meant first and foremost for those communities: residents, grassroots groups, and civil society organizations looking for tools and language to better understand the inequalities they face and to act on them. At the same time, it speaks to policymakers and institutions at every level, offering them a window into realities that are often difficult to capture through traditional data alone. By bringing these audiences together around a shared set of concepts, the Guide hopes to support conversations that lead to real, lasting change.

The Guide describes the multiple, interconnected factors behind territorial inequalities. It acknowledges that communities across Europe face many common challenges while encouraging each community to adapt what they find here to their own context. By offering shared language to describe problems, outcomes, and pathways for change, the Guide aims to support smoother collaboration between communities and policymakers, moving together toward sustainable strategies that leave no place behind.

The Guide is organized in a step-by-step way. It opens by defining key terms, such as "left behindness," "local communities," "stakeholders," and "policymakers", so everyone starts from the same understanding. It then introduces the main policy areas where inequality shows up, the key drivers that cause and sustain it, and the kinds of change that grassroots action can produce. From there, it examines how territorial inequalities are generated and how policies are designed, before moving into concrete solutions and practical tips that communities can use to design their own strategies.

1. KEYWORDS AND BASIC CONCEPTS DEFINITIONS

Almost everyone working on or residing in 'left behind' areas is acquainted with keywords such as 'left behindness' or 'local community'. However, these concepts are often used in different ways and can carry different meanings depending on the context. That is why this 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 by 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 policy-makers 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 POLICY APPROACHES AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS: HOW POLICY ISSUES ARE DEALT WITH

As previously mentioned, territorial inequalities are caused by a complex interplay of factors, thus there are multiple ways to address them. Each policy is influenced by a policy approach, which corresponds to the perspective and basic assumptions adopted to look at the problem. Different perspectives lead to different solutions. The main policy approaches to territorial inequalities can be simplified into two dimensions, one regarding the focus of policies and the other on its relation to place.

Policy focuses refers to the main aspect chosen to observe and evaluate the issues of territorial inequalities, affecting the proposed solutions that policy suggests. Here are examples of existing **policy focuses**:

Examples of **policy focuses**:

Target-specific focus by core policy areas



Territorial inequalities are analyzed by breaking down its different effects (e.g. low employment rate, or lack of infrastructures, or low accessibility to healthcare and social services). The resources are allocated to different interventions, each aimed at tackling one issue; the summing up of the solved problems should solve the broader issue of territorial inequality.

Target-specific focus by vulnerable groups



Territorial inequalities are analyzed as the result of economic under-development, due to industrial failure in the area, or degradation of previous efficient economic activities. In this case, the solution is usually aimed at bringing back capital (through tax incentives or promotion of investments) to stimulate economic activity.

Integrated development approach



Territorial inequalities are analyzed by identifying the groups most affected by these inequalities (e.g. people living in poverty, women, migrants, Roma population, etc.). The resources are then allocated to tailored interventions to support these groups in overcoming specific challenges.

Economic development approach



Territorial inequalities are analyzed as one complex issue composed of different intersecting problems. In this last case, policies will analyze how different factors interact with each other (e.g. low education accessibility causes low employment rates, or depopulation causes reduction of services that causes further depopulation). In these cases, the policy will entail a complex strategy to tackle different problems at a time to prevent the descending effects, requiring stronger cooperation among different administrative structures and levels.

A policy's **relation to place** refers to how it engages with its

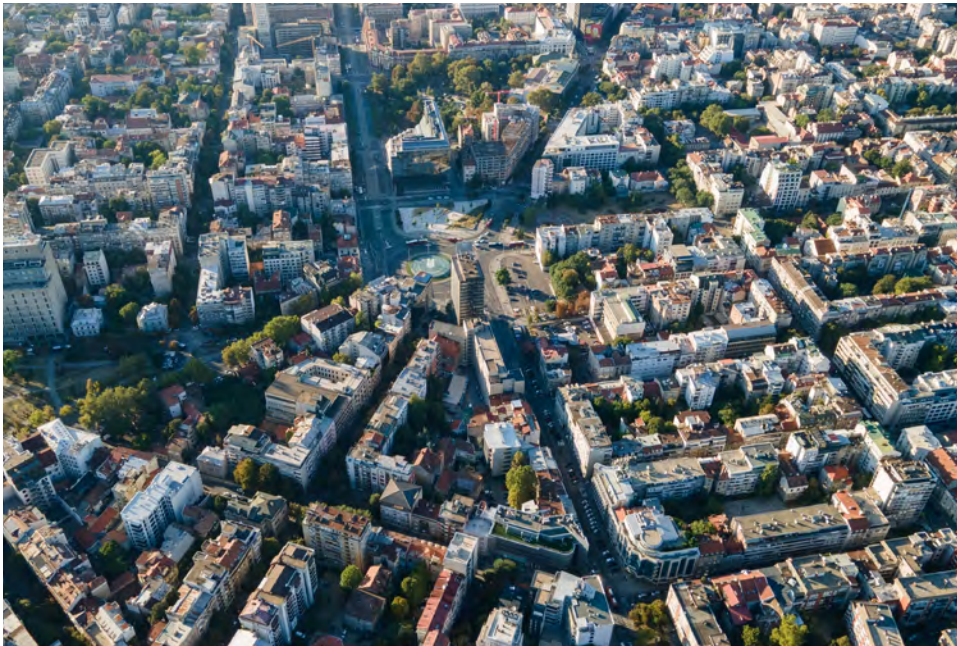
geographical target.

Policies can take either a 'place-blind' or 'place-based' approach.

- ➡ The place-blind one looks at the issues from a broad perspective, and thus will propose one-size-fits-all solutions (e.g. education needs specific investments that are transferred to all municipalities in relation to their population). This approach is currently considered less effective as it tends to ignore specific place-sensitive factors, but it requires a simpler implementation process.
- ➡ The place-based approach considers that in every area, issues can intersect in different ways, thus solutions can be more effective if tailored to the specific context. At present, the place-based approach is considered more effective, but it is important to point out that it usually involves multiple actors, which sometimes can lead to inefficiency.

A policy framework is an organized reflection on specific issues and the preferred strategies to link preferred policy approaches, existing resources, and methods into a coherent action plan. In this, a crucial factor is represented by the involved actors, their relationships and cooperation mechanisms, and the planned time span for implementation. It is evident that the same policy approach organized into a different policy framework would lead to different results.

As discussed below, in some cases public administrations don't have a policy framework in place; when there is one, its implementation and outcomes can be negatively influenced by various factors, which we labeled the drivers of inequality, described below.



2.2 THE DRIVERS OF INEQUALITY AND THEIR EFFECTS

The concept of drivers of inequality indicates a set of broad conditions, such as processes, structures, habits, or shortcomings in policy design and implementation, that contribute to creating inequality or to reducing the effectiveness of policies. These drivers can combine in various ways and interact with the unique features of an area, generating different effects. Not all of them are always present, and some can cause or exacerbate other drivers. Our research has shown that it is difficult to predict their combination, interplay and potential 'snow-ball' effects.

However, listing and describing them allows us to identify elements commonly mentioned in policies, local perceptions, and grassroots initiatives. Even if it's impossible to determine exactly how these drivers generate inequality, using them can facilitate a generalization and comparison across very different areas and strategies.

- 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).

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

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. This confirms that bolstering social infrastructure in under-resourced communities is crucial for fostering resilience, as contended by Tomaney and colleagues (2024). 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 (the full list is provided in the Appendix). 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.

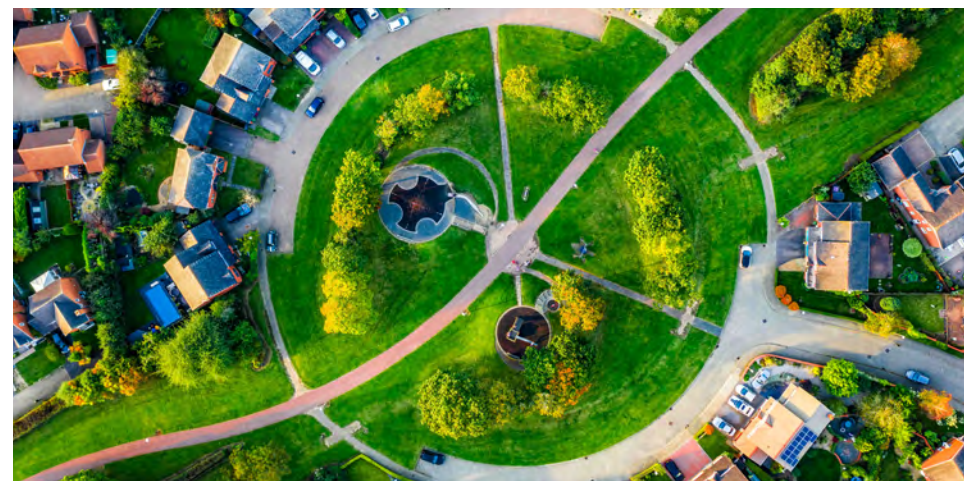
Even more interesting, the analysis of these 38 strategies suggests a convergence on only five impacts, which can respond to multiple drivers of inequality at once; some drivers are more often impacted than others.

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. At first sight, this issue can raise doubts about feasibility, but it must be highlighted as a positive policy result, as the strategy managed to show that the effects of other drivers are deeper than previously assessed. This knowledge can then be used to suggest the need for another strategy or policy intervention to activate Impact I2 (‘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 re-sources	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)	

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 a 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 re-shape 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 USE EXIT KNOWLEDGE TO DESIGN AND DESCRIBE STRATEGIES LOCALLY

One of the questions tackled by the EXIT project is whether the local communities' strategies can be transferred to other contexts. 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 strategies in their own area. The participants, divided into two groups, showed a strong alignment in their perception elaborating two very similar maps, proposing six factors of transferability:



The first transferability factor points to the lack/presence of a coherent policy framework (D1) and to the existence of vertical policy coordination gaps (D2), together with the policymakers' political sensibility towards solving territorial inequalities. The second factor corresponds to the demographic changes (D5) and the third one to the geographical disparities (D8). Thus, these four drivers can be highlighted as especially sensitive, having a direct impact on the ability of local communities to organize 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 detrimental factors in the development of territorial inequalities, as they hinder cooperation within the community, hampering the ability to access existing resources.

As emerged also from the discussion of impacts, 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, as suggested by the six factors of transferability highlighted above, the impacts can be transferred to other contexts by adopting a general structure in the design of different actions, generating similar outcomes.

The research has shown that each unique territorial inequality experience can be broadly generalized using a set of pre-defined drivers. These could allow to individuate root causes of inequality, and thus suggest the most urgent impact to focus on, making strategy design more efficient while valorizing local communities' ability to identify their unique combination of actions.

The diagram below shows the 4 basic parts of the process to design a community-led strategy:



1

Context analysis and selection of the preferred impact

To choose the most urgent and appropriate impact for an area, an effective context analysis is needed, in order to find which drivers can be considered a root cause of inequality, and which ones act as secondary causes. At the same time, different impacts build upon different available resources, which should also be mapped, together with potential obstacles that may hinder the actions. To make a concrete, reality-bound context analysis, it would be efficient to map community needs and to sketch a rough cost-benefit analysis already in this phase. At this stage, the mapping of needs and the cost-benefit analysis do not have to be detailed, but to draft it together with the 'policy' part would help to keep in mind the 'experience' level.

The table below outlines a guided process for observing the context in order to identify policy-level issues alongside immediate needs. To find priorities, it is useful to respond to all questions in the columns at the beginning, and to revise specific content at later stages of the process.



Context analysis				Hooks-to-outcome planning
Policy level context analysis	Community level context analysis	Resources availability analysis (possible answers yes, no, maybe)	Obstacles analysis	Cost-benefit analysis
What drivers can be considered the root causes of inequality?	What are the concrete effects of inequality on the everyday experience?	1) Community assets: skills, competences, material resources, spaces, ability to cooperate or to prompt community cooperation	Which drivers can limit access to core resources (different from those listed among the root causes)?	Considering available resources and existing obstacles, which needs can be successfully responded to? Which needs might be only partially responded to?
Do these drivers generate other drivers? If yes, which ones?	From a community perspective, what are the most urgent needs and why?	2) Local assets: Ability to activate horizontal inter-agency cooperation and these actors' resources	Other obstacles, such as lack of political interest	What immediate effect would be generated by the action?
		3) External assets: ability to gain institutional, technical and/or financial support. Existing regional or national policies should be included here.		What positive outcomes would be generated by the action? Can you think of negative outcomes of this action? In which cases would this happen?

The first column, presenting the drivers that can be considered root causes, helps to immediately orient the choice towards a specific impact.

As shown by the EXIT research, the ability of the community and the local network to cooperate is a key asset that can activate a wide set of resources. For this reason, if drivers such as weak inter-agency cooperation (D3) and/or social fragmentation and detachment (D10) are listed in the first column as a root cause of inequality, it would be efficient, as a first step, to select a final impact aimed at reducing the negative effects of these drivers. Similarly, if the root causes are represented by institutional or technical factors, chosen among the other drivers, it would be advisable to direct the strategy to impacts aimed at suggesting pathways for policymakers to reshape delivery models or to remove obstacles. This is especially relevant in contexts where horizontal cooperation can be easily activated and maintained.

Given the uniqueness of each area, it is up to communities to decide which shortlisted impact is more appropriate to the specific context. The descriptions in the previous section can support this decision.

The driver 'EU funding disparities' (D9) was not mentioned on purpose: it should not be listed in the first column because the driver represents the inability to access the specific resource "EU funding". This inability alone is unlikely to be the root cause of territorial inequality. This driver might be listed in the obstacle column, and tackled together with other drivers generated in the administrative and policy domain, such as lack of a coherent policy framework (D1), vertical policy coordination gaps (D2), insufficient institutional capacities (D7).

Drivers considered as root cause	Preferred impacts
• Weak horizontal inter-agency cooperation (D3) • Fragmented social fabric and loss of connection between local community and institutions (D10)	• To reclaim residents' agency over their environment • To rebuild trust among local actors and between local communities and administrations • To bridge gap between institutional spaces and the wider social fabric
• Lack of a coherent policy framework (D1) • Vertical policy coordination gaps (D2) • Disparities in funding allocation (D4) • Demographic changes (D5) • Balance between centralization and decentralization (D6), • Insufficient institutional capacities (D7) • Geographical disparities (D8)	• To show pathways to reshape delivery models • To show pathways to remove obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish

2

Choosing hooks and outcomes

The design of hooks and outcomes is the phase where the local communities' direct knowledge of needs, people and resources is the most valuable asset. Formal guidelines usually indicate to use impacts to select outcomes, and to use the outcomes to design actions. However, we use the phrase 'hook and outcome' to indicate that the design of hooks and outcomes should be a single phase, where often intuition leads from hooks to outcomes or from outcomes to hooks. What is crucial here is the concept: each action must hook the target to generate one or more medium-term general outcomes to make the final impact achievable. But how to appropriately generate them in an area deeply depends on its unique context, thus it is difficult to recommend adopting one order or the other.

In simple words, in a given area, a need is felt so urgent that to simply alleviate it can generate a valuable outcome and trigger further actions, even if the strategy is only half successful. In another area, where the community needs a "trust boost" towards activation to counteract disillusionment, the same half successful response to urgent needs could backfire reinforcing the drivers. On the contrary, a fully successful action responding to a simple, secondary need might restore a sense of agency within the community, which is a more effective outcome in the second context. Again, here general considerations are provided, and the final choice is for the community to take, based on their knowledge and intuition.

Once there is a broad idea of appropriate hooks and outcomes, it should be possible to know which policy area is involved. With this information, it would be possible to map in greater detail existing resources such as policies, funding opportunities, institutional bodies to invite for cooperation.

With this information, the last column of the context analysis can be completed in greater detail, and the results used to inform the final choice for hooks and outcomes.

In the table below, a non-exhaustive and non-prescriptive list of outcomes is suggested in connections with impacts.

Preferred impact	Preferred outcomes
• To reclaim residents' agency over their environment • To rebuild trust among local actors and between local communities and administrations • To bridge gap between institutional spaces and the wider social fabric	• Stronger mutual trust • Greater awareness on community's ability to tackle inequality at the local level and increased proactivity • Empowerment of residents • Creation of negotiation mechanisms • Increased available resources pool • Increased sense of belonging and attachment to place
• To show pathways to reshape delivery models • To show pathways to remove obstacles that prevent local experiences to flourish	• Attraction of interest by policymakers, upper administrative levels, other stakeholders • Creation of tools or networks to strengthen local capacities • Creation of skills, tools or networks to interact with policymaking at higher levels (regional or national) • Increase of available resources pool • Creation of negotiation or co-programming mechanisms that include local communities and policymakers

3

Designing the hooks

The concrete actions constitute the specific features of the strategy: from restoring a building, to holding community meetings, from setting up a medical or training service, to designing transport system re-organization, any action can lead to the achievement of the outcomes and the final long-term impact. Actions are usually the first element designed by the communities, adapted to their everyday experiences, common feelings and resources, so details are not useful here. It is relevant to recommend that actions should be planned to define which are the direct responses to the selected need, which are potential indirect responses to other needs, and how this should feed into the outcomes. This could help to maximize the effects, to avoid losing track of the plan during the implementation phase, and to communicate better the strategy to other actors.

While designing the actions, it is also important to distinguish between policy-driven interventions, usually connected with public investments on a specific topic or geographical area, and grassroots movements and community-led initiatives, usually funded and managed completely at the local level based on local needs.

Whether a strategy is implemented in cooperation with other actors, or contributes to highlighting the absence of a particular actor, it is essential to clearly define who does what. When a grassroots strategy aims to take over a neglected responsibility or provide resources to other actors, it is crucial to state it clearly, to maximize the outcome and make the final impact evident. At the same time, in case of collaboration with the public administration or economic actors, it should be underscored that each category has specific priorities and speaks a different technical language. To ensure a smooth and effective cooperation, it's important to clarify common grounds of action and relevant language, the areas of autonomy, the rights and duties, and the expectations of each side. To state clear boundaries facilitates communication, mutual respect and trust, strengthening cooperation.

4

Implementation and evaluation phase

Even if the strategy is well designed, new resources may appear, or obstacles may manifest. Cooperation may entail conflict, and the political and institutional context can change. At the same time, the actions themselves are designed to modify the social and material context where the community lives. All this can cause turbulence even in the best-designed action plan, and flexibility is the key to success. Going back to the context analysis table of this section can help to reassess the overall situation and, if needed, to design a parallel strategy to support or re-adapt the one under implementation (for example in the case of lacking resources). Thus, evaluation of hooks, outcomes and impacts should be considered a daily exercise running throughout design and implementation phases, and not only 'the final step'.

The evaluation of strategies involves the analysis of direct and indirect results of the actions, as well as the outcomes and the achieved impacts. The overall impact can be evaluated against the assessment of whether the effects of the drivers causing inequality are reduced and/or new resources are being made available. This evaluation process can be guided by the same table proposed at the beginning of this section. If communities respond to the questions as a first step and then do it again during the implementation, and once again after the strategy has been finalized, they can find a simple factsheet that enables comparison across time, measuring change. Using the same table, each evaluation phase can be the starting point for a new action plan.

FINAL REMARKS: ADVOCACY AS A CRITICAL TOOL FOR COMMUNITIES

As a conclusion, it's possible to confirm the hypothesis noted in the EXIT project "Cross-national report on strategies and practices": "[...] 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).

It is necessary to underscore that even if it is possible to rely on local communities' support to adapt delivery models or to smooth the digital transition process, it is the institutions that have the power to design complex administrative structures and ensure an **equitable access to basic services connected with human rights, such as health and education, and access to democratic processes and civil rights**. The same is true for the driver "EU funding disparities" (D9): local actors can equip themselves with better tools to access EU funding, but the power to design different allocation schemes and to make EU project calls more equitable and accessible to citizens lays with the policymakers. Structural reforms that reshape roles, responsibilities, and funding systems are often needed; however, ensuring the active engagement of all stakeholders is just as crucial: the State with its articulations and its ability to keep a broad, democratic, overview; the non-profit sector with its ability to activate and maintain the vitality of local communities while providing specific skillsets and networks; the private sector with its support to economic growth and to fostering innovation from a peripheral perspective; residents, who in the final instance own the right and the responsibility to contribute in the first instance and advocate for the other actors to be responsible and accountable.

As highlighted in the discussion of the impacts "To restate and reclaim residents' agency" and "To rebuild trust among local actors and between residents and institutions", advocacy skills and practices emerge as a core resource to ensure the active involvement of all actors, and a critical tool to engage the local communities at the tables where policy reforms are written and implemented. For this reason, while responding to direct, local needs, local communities could expand their scope to join the debates over regional, national, and European policy. A main advocacy objective could be to push for policymaking interventions focused on ensuring the continuous presence of critical resources in the area or aimed at sustaining the engagement and cooperation of different actors through institutional mechanisms. The uptake of locally designed strategies could also be promoted by horizontal exchange across areas and common advocacy towards regional or national administrations.

The debates around the position and role of the non-profit sector within the EU and national democratic systems and economies might seem a far-away issue from the perspective of 'left behind areas'. However, active and engaged local communities can contribute to nurturing and protecting the civic space that ensures autonomy and operability to the NGOs and civil society organizations that play a vital role in left behind areas. At the same time, the abuse of volunteering to conceal exploitative practices that allow for low-wage or non-paid work needs to be consistently reported and fought against.

Strategies and policy interventions aimed at bringing change around stronger democratic processes, mutual trust, and continued engagement both on the horizontal and vertical administrative and civic articulations can be highly effective in **opening pathways for sustainable, long-term reduction of territorial inequalities**.



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