

EDITORIAL

Left Behind Regions in Europe and Beyond

The causes and impacts of new and enduring regional inequalities have been much debated in many regions and countries around the globe over the past decade. This has been reflected in public and political discourse with references to and imaginaries of so-called ‘forgotten’ or ‘left behind’ regions and peripheral territories. Discourses and movements of political discontent have sparked off renewed debates on uneven development and the experience of left-behind places, which struggle with persistent social and economic challenges and might appear to be seen as ‘places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018).

Interregional spatial inequality and policies which seek to address this are of course nothing new and have formed part of spatial planning approaches in countries and regions which have adopted the ‘regional economic’ model of planning (CEC, 1997). The UN meanwhile promotes the aspiration to ‘Leave no one behind’ (LNOB) as ‘the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)’. It is also stated that ‘LNOB not only entails reaching the poorest of the poor, but requires combating discrimination and rising inequalities within and amongst countries, and their root causes’ (UN, n.d.). The EU too has long pursued a Cohesion Policy supported by structural investment funds which seek to address regional disparities and unlock the territorial and human development potential of places across its Member States. As well as interregional patterns of disparities, recent years have also seen a widening of intraregional gaps, for example, between regenerating and reurbanising regional cities (Dembski et al. 2020) and smaller towns or villages (Dorling and Thomas, 2004; OECD, 2017; Tomaney et al., 2019; Veltz, 1996). This is a phenomenon which has been observable in both developed and developing countries across the world. The disruption and uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have also overlaid existing intraregional inequalities creating new dynamics which have interacted with existing marginalisation tendencies. The ability of places to adapt and be resilient through processes of territorial transition is conditioned by several factors which vary across different localities. These include planning and developmental policies and strategies and processes of local adaptation and innovation, participation, and governance. This provides scope for comparative perspectives and research to develop understandings of policy approaches which can foster resilient and inclusive regions.

Informed by the context outlined above, this issue of *Transactions of AESOP* explores ‘Left-behind Regions in Europe and Beyond’. It presents papers arising from two events and one project which have explored policy debates surrounding and responses to ‘left behind regions’. The first event was organised by the AESOP French and British Planning Studies Thematic Group in June 2021 as part of the joint Regional Studies Association (RSA) and AESOP tracks at the [Regions in Recovery Building Sustainable Futures - Global E-Festival](#) (June 2–18, 2021). The session was convened by Olivier Sykes (University of Liverpool), Xavier Desjardins (Sorbonne Université) and Philippe Estèbe (CNAM). The participants from different states and regions were asked to explore: 1) the framing of the issue of forgotten, left behind and peripheral regions in public debates; 2) the criteria used to define priority regions for policy intervention; and, 3) the policy aims and tools of new or reformed regional policies which are seeking to address the challenges of such territories. The papers by Desjardins and Estèbe (Sorbonne Université and Coopérative Acadie), Agim Kërçuku (Politecnico di Milano) and Abigail Taylor (City-REDI, University of Birmingham) were presented at this session. The second event which has fed into this issue was a workshop on the theme of [‘Beyond Intra-regional inequalities: Understanding the dynamism of resilient and inclusive regions’](#). This was organised as part of a research network project jointly funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Taiwanese Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST)

and took place within the *Asialics - Beyond Intra-regional Inequality* conference held on 29-30 June 2022. The paper by Chang (National Chen Kung University, Tainan) was first presented at this event. Finally, the paper by Arnold and Hickson arises from work conducted by the authors at the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, at the University of Liverpool, an interdisciplinary research institute focusing on the development of sustainable and inclusive cities and city regions.

The paper from Arnold and Hickson addresses the UK government's 'Levelling Up' agenda which represents the latest attempt to address long-standing interregional socio-economic disparities. It assesses how the *Levelling Up the UK White Paper*, published in early 2022, frames the problem of interregional inequality and the potential of the proposed solutions contained within it to address the problem. It argues that the White Paper represents a welcome attempt to embed and elevate regional policy into central government activity, but that if regional policy is to mean anything, it cannot be about everything. The paper argues that a more targeted spatial focus, with emphasis on key policy levers, needs to be developed to meaningfully tackle interregional inequality in England, and that 'second-tier' city-regions represent the most obvious building blocks of an agenda focused on improving economic performance outside London and the South East. Using the Liverpool City Region as a case study area, the paper highlights three policy areas where further work is required to build on the *Levelling Up the UK White Paper*.

The paper from Chang focuses on a region of southern Taiwan and argues that though left-behind places are a global phenomenon, they are sited in different development contexts that require customized, place-based solutions. The paper discusses a possible approach to working with left-behind areas through leveraging the capacities of universities as institutional resources to engage people and places in regional regeneration. Using the Collaborative Badlands project in Zuoqhen, Taiwan, as an example, it describes the learning journey of developing solutions and companionship between a research university and communities in a left behind rural region. Adopting a hybrid approach of an asset-based approach to community development and collaborative planning for regional development, the case demonstrates a potential levelling-up strategy for sustainable development in a lagging region.

The paper from Desjardins and Estèbe presents comparative research on place-based policies which address 'forgotten territories' in Europe. It shows the variety of trajectories through which the territorial question is placed on the agenda and the ways of defining what constitute 'forgotten' territories within the different countries considered. This variety reveals specific processes linked to short- and long-term debates about the different nations and their development. The tools used to help these territories tend to converge, under the influence of methods coming from the European Union. However, the functions of these territories are still unclear in national planning strategies, particularly because their possible contributions to processes such as ecological transition and its associated economic models are only imperfectly defined.

The paper from Kërçuku on 'forgotten Italian territories' shows how these have primarily been understood as compact physical and conceptual spaces. Whilst the terms used to describe their boundaries and the key issues that they face have changed over time, they have been defined through homogeneous images: *Mezzogiorno* (Southern Italy), peripheries, and Inner Areas. Such representation affects conceptualization as well as the measures taken to close the gaps between the forgotten territories and dynamic areas. In recent years, the numerous crises of the 21st century have shattered this representation and brought about a new geography of forgotten Italy, the *Italia di mezzo* (in-between Italy). The new geography is not linked only to the North-South dichotomy and does not concern only the metropolitan peripheries and inner areas.

The final paper from Taylor notes that addressing issues of regional inequalities and supporting 'left behind' regions is a global issue, but that analysis of regions that have successfully levelled up is limited. It argues too that developing and implementing effective place-based policies is critical for recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic but remains an under-explored issue. The paper provides insights into different policies and tools used to support left-behind places. Comparing the experiences of addressing socio-economic challenges in Greater Lille, Nantes, the Ruhr region, San Antonio, and Estonia, it discusses what ingredients are required to successfully address inequalities, what has worked well, and future challenges. It identifies seven "foundations" for levelling up and stresses the importance of levelling up "within" regions and not just the levelling up "of" regions. In particular, it debates opportunities to support levelling up through financial management and governance tools.

As a collection the papers therefore address the features of left behind places in a variety of settings in Europe and other global regions. They provide valuable insights into how this phenomenon manifests and is perceived in different places and the planning and development strategies adopted in response to the issues faced by places, that may be 'left behind', but matter to those living there, the policymakers working to address their challenges, and the wider development prospects of the states within which they are situated.

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