Objective multi-dimensional inequalities and their perception: exploring the geography of their mismatch and drivers

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Abstract

Studying inequality perception is becoming increasingly important since multi-dimensional objective disparities—along with their perception—influence social cohesion, political stability, institutional trust, and economic development. These aspects are key to regional policies, as shown in research on the "geography of discontent" (McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and Euroscepticism (European Commission, 2024).

Perceived inequality, shaped by complex personal and social factors, remains challenging to study due to data scarcity. Increasingly, surveys such as the Eurobarometer (Díaz-Lanchas et al., 2021; Faggian et al., 2023), Social Survey Programme (Haddon & Wu, 2021; Roex et al., 2018), and the European Values Study (EVS) (Kitsnik, 2023) are used to explore the geography of perceived inequality. However, knowledge of geographical distribution at granular scales remains limited. Our research addresses this gap through a NUTS-3 level analysis.

We integrate objective social, economic, environmental, and digital measures with perceived inequalities data from the EVS fifth wave (2017–2020) (EVS, 2022) in France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal across 278 NUTS-3 regions categorized as predominantly urban, intermediate, or rural.

Findings on objective inequalities reveal clear rural-urban divides. Perceptions do not show any significant differences between countries but high within-country variations. Rural regions report the highest perceived inequality, often reflecting objective marginalization. Intermediate regions exhibit the lowest perceptions despite higher objective inequalities than urban areas.

We contribute to the literature by providing a cross-country and within-country analysis of the relationship between objective and subjective inequalities on a granular scale, exploring what drives the latter. Our study highlights the importance of addressing disparities across different degrees of peripherality through policies informed by inequality perceptions to foster more equitable and sustainable development.

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