Article

'There's Nothing We Can Do for You Here': Experiences of Territorial Inequality and Resistance in Two Italian Local Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines two cases of territorial inequalities in Italy: Murano (Venice), renowned for artistic glassmaking, and the inner-rural area of Gennargentu–Mandrolisai (Sardinia). Despite their differences, findings indicate that the two areas share experiences of exclusion linked not only to physical isolation but also, and above all, to a lack of effective public policies. The findings suggest that territorial disparity results from multiple processes requiring targeted responses.

Keywords: territorial inequalities; Italy; Murano; Gennargentu–Mandrolisai; left behindness; peripheralisation; mobilisation; activism

1. Introduction

Territorial inequalities have recently come to the fore (again) as a key fault line in European societies (Moulaert et al. 2003; OECD 2024), giving rise to new forms of social hardship and widespread feelings of exclusion from processes of development (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Although heterogenous in geographical and socio-economic terms, "marginal" areas like rural or post-industrial areas suffer from a lack of essential services, a weakened social fabric, and poor recognition, leading to deep uncertainty about the future. Although these areas have some public infrastructure or social services, they tend to be of low quality and/or to have insufficient capacity to meet the needs of residents (Barca et al. 2012). This also results in a certain number of young people with high unemployment rates, low levels of education and a lack of prospects in the labour market. This is particularly evident in so-called 'left-behind places' (MacKinnon et al. 2022).

This article explores the dynamics of territorial inequality in two Italian contexts through an analysis of the empirical data collected in 2024–2025 within the Horizon project "EXIT. Exploring Sustainable Strategies to Counteract Territorial Inequalities from an Intersectional Approach". The research was conducted in two places: Murano, a post-industrial island in the Venetian lagoon, and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, an inner area of Sardinia which is part of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI). The research questions were the following: what are the experiences and perceptions of territorial inequality lived by inhabitants and stakeholders of the selected areas? What are the specific problems experienced by the inhabitants of the selected areas and the interrelationships between them, generating different pockets of disadvantage that complement each other and aggravate this inequality? How do the inhabitants' areas experience and represent territorial

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disparities in terms of disenfranchisement, lack of power and citizenship, and symbolic exclusion?

Despite their geographical and administrative differences, both places have forms of spatial, economic and symbolic exclusion attributable not only to physical isolation but, above all, to a lack of public policies aimed at meeting their needs. Murano has seen socio-economic decline after a more prosperous industrial past, with rising unemployment and shrinking social, commercial, educational and health infrastructure, as well as possible environmental problems due to former industries. Gennargentu-Mandrolisai is an inner area, in a hilly and mountainous context, with an agro-pastoral economy, far from urban areas, suffering isolation and economic depression.

Adopting a localised and targeted approach (Jubany et al. 2025; Karasz et al. 2025), our qualitative research aimed at a detailed analysis of the way in which territorial inequalities are manifested at a local level and to understand the various forces at play in the local contexts and the uneven effects they produce. These two areas are taken as case studies for understanding how territorial inequalities are produced and reproduced day-to-day and the social responses that emerge to address them from the bottom up. Through an analysis of the experiences and perceptions of residents and local stakeholders, our research pointed to highlighting the link between macro-structural processes (industrial decline, depopulation, cuts to public services, and so on) and everyday practices of opposition to territorial inequalities. It thus tried to draw a tapestry of local voices, ranging from community representatives to individual residents, from civil society groups to community organisations and residents' collectives.

The article is organised as follows. The Materials and Methods section describes the methodology and the two selected cases. The paragraph "Understanding Territorial Inequalities" offers an overview on territorial inequality and the dynamics of peripheralisation of places and people living in these places. The paragraph "Results and Analysis" presents the empirical data collected during the fieldwork in the selected areas: Murano and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai. The fourth paragraph, "Mobilisations Against Territorial Inequalities", focuses on forms of mobilisation by inhabitants towards local disparities. The final paragraph discusses the findings and addresses the issue of public policies.

Materials and Methods

The selection of case studies is based on a non-comparative analysis of two distinct contexts, chosen for their theoretical and methodological relevance and according to the following socio-economic and demographic elements.

Murano, which is part of the island municipality of Venice-Murano-Burano, falls within the "area of complex industrial crisis" as defined by the Italian Ministry of Economic Development (Invitalia 2018). This definition applies to areas facing nationally significant economic recession and job losses due to the crisis of specific industrial sectors or large companies. Murano was chosen by the ministry because of the crisis in the glass industry. The number of employees in artistic glass production in Murano has declined dramatically over the years: in 1971, there were 3142; in 1981, there were 2290; and in 2010, there were only 800 (Barucco et al. 2022). Although Murano is one of the most densely populated areas of Venice (3498 inhabitants/km^2), it has suffered severe depopulation within the broader context of an ageing population across the city, which in 2023 had an estimated old-age index of 222.4. On top of these processes of deindustrialisation and depopulation, residents understand touristification and gentrification as contributing to a process of territorial expropriation. Finally, according to the mapping of incomes carried out in 2021, while the average per capita income in the city stood at EUR 22,099, in Murano it was only EUR 17,919[1].

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Gennargentu-Mandrolisai was selected as a case study because it is included within the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI: see below definition and description). These areas are chosen according to three criteria (adopted by the SNAI for Italy's inner areas): they are not coastal; they are at high risk of depopulation; and they are in peripheral or ultra-peripheral locations. Gennargentu-Mandrolisai was chosen by the Ministry as a "prototype" area in Sardinia for the implementation of the SNAI (Formez 2023). It is made up of eleven municipalities: Aritzo, Atzara, Austis, Belvì, Desulo, Gadoni, Meana Sardo, Ortueri, Sorgono, Teti and Tonara. The Gennargentu-Mandrolisai has formally confirmed its participation in the 2021–2027 planning cycle and has thus been allocated additional resources. The early designation of Gennargentu-Mandrolisai as a "prototype" area highlights its critical importance within the SNAI framework as a result of its severe demographic and economic challenges. It has limited access to essential public services (transport, healthcare, and education) and is subject to extreme depopulation and a rapidly ageing population. Its socio-economic fabric is agro-pastoral, with tourism becoming increasingly important.

For our ethnographic research, respondents were selected using snowball sampling and direct recruitment during participant observation phases. The research design included in-depth interviews, walking interviews and participant observation, with the aim of providing a multifaceted and comprehensive understanding of perceptions and daily practices related to territorial inequalities. Field observations provided key insights into the differences between discourse and practice, enriching the qualitative analysis.

A total of 68 semi-structured interviews were conducted, involving 77 participants, including residents and stakeholders (representatives of local associations, trade unions, policy makers and employees of public bodies such as job centres), who were equally distributed between the two areas. In Murano, 35 interviews were conducted with 39 people. Of these, seven were with local stakeholders, including business owners, cultural leaders and local authorities. The remaining 28 interviews were with residents, who shared their personal experiences and the challenges they faced, with particular reference to the economic transformations affecting the island. The latter were mainly elderly people. Their availability and greater willingness to share their personal stories made them an accessible and insightful group, while also reflecting Murano's demographic structure. A significant proportion of the interviewees were small business owners and glass producers, in keeping with the area's economic structure.

In Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, 33 interviews were conducted with 38 people. Of these, 10 were key figures such as local government workers, social workers and healthcare professionals. The remaining 23 interviews were conducted with residents from across the various area's municipalities. The aim was to include the perspectives of residents in the most remote municipalities, who often face additional problems in accessing essential services. This diversification of the sample thus allowed us to gather a wide range of perspectives on crucial local issues. During the fieldwork, a clear contrast emerged between the hilly area of Mandrolisai and the mountainous area of Gennargentu, further highlighting the importance of hearing from respondents from all municipalities in order to provide a comprehensive overview of the local socio-economic landscape. The interviewees included a substantial number of self-employed workers, particularly bar owners and farm owners, reflecting key sectors of local employment. However, this composition was also partly influenced by the greater accessibility and willingness of self-employed workers and small business owners to talk. For reasons of confidentiality, interviewees' names have been changed.

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2. Understanding Territorial Inequalities

In order to understand territorial inequalities in the aforementioned local contexts, we used the concepts of peripheralisation (Kühn 2015; Copus et al. 2017) and left-behind place and a bottom-up approach.

Pezzi and Urso (2017) distinguish between peripherality and peripheralisation. Whereas the former is a static condition, a structural state characterised by elements such as geographical distance from centres, outward migration, ageing populations and intrinsic economic weaknesses, the latter is a dynamic process in which marginalisation is exacerbated through socio-economic and political factors.

Left-behindness—the condition of being left behind by public policies and investment choices, contributing to heightened political disaffection, sometimes expressed through protest voting and support for populist or anti-establishment options (Rodríguez-Pose 2018)—here is understood as a form of territorial inequality. Much like peripheralisation, it can be interpreted as an outcome of long-term structural processes that reinforce inequalities and vulnerabilities in already "depressed" and "marginal" areas. The notion of being left behind captures economic decline and socio-cultural dislocation experienced by communities that perceive themselves as excluded from the benefits of national development. These areas often face high unemployment, depopulation, deteriorating infrastructure, and diminishing essential services, while the outmigration of younger and more educated individuals further erodes their social and economic fabric. These dynamics collectively foster a self-reinforcing cycle of decline that is difficult to reverse (Rodríguez-Pose et al. 2024).

A bottom-up approach (place-based) focused and localised on territorial issues and needs (Barca 2009; Barca et al. 2012) provided a tool for engaging with territorial inequalities, which in Italy affect numerous geographical areas—both urban and extra-urban—resulting in multiple and multi-directional territorial differences (Istat 2024, pp. 159–203).

The aforementioned dynamics are particularly evident in former industrial neighbourhoods (Tierney et al. 2023) and urban suburbs (MacKinnon et al. 2022), which suffer from a scarcity of activities and services (Coppola et al. 2021) and are often characterised by forms of exclusion, segregation, isolation, and marginality. Usually seen as difficult and tricky, these areas are subject to a variety of problems: low levels of education and employment; high levels of physical, olfactory, acoustic and visual pollution; a mono-functionality that makes them into dormitory neighbourhoods; and social problems such as violence, precarity, poverty and difficulties in multicultural coexistence. To add to this, institutions often show little interest in these areas, which exacerbates residents' sense of abandonment. Similar phenomena, albeit with their own specificities, can be found in Italian inner areas. Here some local entrepreneurs take advantage of intangible resources such as the area's cultural heritage, landscape and environment to create new economic opportunities (Cois and Pacetti 2020). Indeed, when tourism includes the local population in the process of valorising the area's cultural heritage, it is often seen as a tool for economic and social regeneration. Public policies, such as the SNAI, play a fundamental role in supporting initiatives promoting agricultural development, tourism and the implementation of essential services. The National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale Aree Interne, SNAI) is a public policy launched in 2012 by the Italian government to counteract the decline of inner areas. 'Inner areas' indicate those areas characterised by a significant distance from the centres offering essential services; it includes almost 4000 municipalities, equal to 58% of the national area, inhabited in 2021 by about 13.4 million people. Technically, in the definition of the National Strategy for Internal Areas (SNAI), 'peripheral areas' indicates municipalities located at a distance of between 40 and 75 min from the nearest service hub and, in general, areas located on the edge of a city or territory, at a certain distance from a service hub, with a lower density of services, infrastructures and economic activities.

Within this framework, the Technical Committee for Inner Areas played a significant role in developing a place-based approach and provided local communities with technical and knowledge-based support in their interactions with national authorities. However, over the years this experience was neither consolidated nor institutionalised: administrative learning did not take place, and the technostructure, at both local and national levels, was not strengthened (Lucatelli et al. 2022). As a result, in April 2025 the Italian government approved the National Strategic Plan for Inner Areas 2021–2027 (Piano Strategico Nazionale delle Aree Interne, PSNAI), which effectively marked the end of the SNAI's ambitions by abandoning its original aims.

However, the debate on responses to territorial inequalities is often dominated by a "retorica del borgo" ("village" rhetoric) that has distorted the significance of these places (Barbera et al. 2022). The term "borgo" (villages from the Renaissance or Mediaeval age) is used extensively to refer to any small settlement, replacing the more general idea of a "paese" (village or town). This narrative promotes a specific vision of development based on the aestheticisation and idealisation of Italy, trapping it in a past that becomes a commodity. This phenomenon of "piccolo borghismo" (little villagism) influences investments in culture (such as those made through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan) and results in a narrative of the regeneration of "marginal" areas for the purposes of tourism, ignoring the reality of areas made up of abandoned buildings and poor infrastructures (Bindi 2021). This rhetoric should be countered by an alternative vision for the future of inner areas that recognises that true regeneration does not come solely through the development of tourism but requires the establishment of real everyday liveability. Contrary to what is implied by initiatives such as "1 euro houses"[2], the repopulation of these areas depends on the development of new economies and forms of local society, investing in skills, essential services (health and education) and mobility (Cersosimo et al. 2022; Colavitti et al. 2024).

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Murano: Insularity, Crisis and Community in the Balance

Murano is an island of approximately 4680 inhabitants in the Venetian lagoon and is famous for its tradition of glassmaking. Today, despite being the core of Venice's artistic glass-making district and close to the historic centre (about 20 min by vaporetto—water bus), Murano is undergoing major socio-economic transformations that have turned it into a veritable "periphery in the centre", with all the contradictions that come with that.

The physical and symbolic space occupied by Murano due to its ancient tradition of glassmaking is rapidly changing. The area's economic driver and the beating heart of its identity, glassmaking only survives today in small family workshops sometimes relegated to a mere showcase for mass tourism. As a former glass craftsman recounts with nostalgia: "When I was young, Murano was blue: work overalls everywhere. Now it's empty, silent". Added to this is a feeling of being abandoned by the institutions: "We are a global brand, but who stands up for us? Who represents us?", asks a local glass artist.

The effects of exogenous events that are impossible to control at the local level—the 2008–2010 financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing gas prices, and competition from Asian markets—have compounded long-term dynamics of a gradual erosion of productive structures. Between 2009 and 2015, in Murano, the number of businesses in the glass sector fell from 226 to 212. In 2020, the number of companies operating on the island fell to around 150 (Barucco et al. 2022). This crisis reflects the economic and structural problems faced in this sector, despite its status as a historic and cultural symbol of Venice (Invitalia 2018). At the basis of this downward trend in production and employment there are a number of factors, including international competition with other glass districts, such as Bohemia, and industrial automation (Barucco et al. 2022). The elimination of subsidies

for buying methane gas has increased production costs, while environmental regulations have imposed legitimate restrictions on the use of traditional materials such as cadmium and arsenic trioxide, complicating the production of certain colours and techniques. Made for health and environmental reasons, these changes were perceived as coming from above, with glass manufacturers expected to take the blow.

Periods of economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation. Restrictions and lockdowns led to a decrease in orders, meaning revenue from glassmaking dropped or even completely disappeared, and also severely affected tourism, which is a primary source of income for the island. Furthermore, the high cost of raw materials in Murano compared to other regions—including other areas in the Municipality of Venice—has aggravated the situation, even leading to the closure of several factories, which was also discussed in some interviews. For example, in an interview with a former glassworks owner, we were told that "with the recent pandemic, the price of gas has risen dramatically [. . .] 40% of factories have closed". A glass artist explained that "from the point of view of cost, you are out of the market. The most important thing is to show that you are on the island, where glass is not just talked about but also made. If we look at the last four or five years, the biggest challenges have been the COVID-19 pandemic, the high tide in 2019 that almost destroyed our kilns, and the cost of gas, which we are still dealing with". The spike in gas prices has been particularly burdensome for the glass sector due to the specific nature of its production process. As one interviewee noted, "the workshops, with their furnaces operating 24 h a day at temperatures of up to 1200 degrees, furnaces cannot be turn off because otherwise workshops would not be able to work the next day. This means a huge and constant consumption of gas". The recurring nature of these challenges has created a sense of abandonment.

Dependence on tourism has made the sector vulnerable, and the difficulty in attracting young workers—resulting in a lack of generational turnover—has contributed to its decline. This is an issue perceived by older generations who retain a sense of pride and belonging in the industry, forged at the height of the industry's socio-economic success. Two interviewees from the Circolo Culturale e Ricreativo Murano addressed the issue of young people's disaffection with glass production through a project funded by the Municipality of Venice, in the form of an interactive comic strip created in collaboration with the Abate Zanetti glass school:

The project is about the possibility of getting young people excited about working with Murano glass, because we think, among the many issues affecting Murano glass—its crisis—is the lack of young workers. And we think the lack of young workers is linked to the fact that young people do not choose to work with glass because they do not have a real understanding of what glassworking is in all its forms. That is, glass understood as design, understood as. . . the chemical part of making glass paste, understood as direct glassworking, but also indirect, such as decoration, engraving, lampworking, mirrors, etc. All these processes, which are historical processes in Murano that are now disappearing, are, we think, dictated by the fact that there are no young workers.

3.2. Murano: A Periphery in the Centre

Murano's access to services is clearly affected by its being a little island. According to a research report by Ires Veneto (2023) on the relationship between accessibility, use of health services and quality of life in Insular Venice, with a particular focus on the needs of the frail and the elderly, Murano has basic health services, including general practitioners' (GP) surgeries, with two doctors operating on the island. The average distance between these surgeries and people's homes is about 7.3 min on foot, less than a kilometre, and Murano also has two pharmacies, which are a key point of reference for residents, especially for

those who do not visit the doctor often. However, there are no hospitals or specialist clinics, forcing residents to travel to the historic centre or other islands to access these services. Furthermore, the island does not have intermediate facilities such as community hospitals.

Water buses and other public transport are essential for connecting Murano to different areas of Venice, but residents often argue the service is unsatisfactory, particularly due to its overcrowding and infrequency (Ires Veneto 2023). Although Murano formally benefits from a health district, its usability is partially compromised by increasing reductions in staff, the absence of permanent specialists (such as paediatricians), and the frequent need to travel to the mainland to obtain more advanced care. This situation was confirmed by several interviewees: "They gave us a paediatrician who comes twice a week, but is based in Venice. What happens if a child is ill on Monday evening?" These are the words of a mother representing Mamme per Murano, which, as we will see below, is an association created with the aim of ensuring that essential services are guaranteed.

Although the island is in theory well connected to the centre of Venice, residents describe a daily experience of "hindered mobility": water buses crowded with tourists, insufficient services during peak times, frequent delays, and fog that completely isolates the island. As an elderly resident said, "The problem is not just getting around, but feeling pushed aside. The transport is not designed for us, but for people who come to visit Murano for two hours and then leave". This perception intensifies on public holidays, when tourist traffic peaks, making mobility difficult and tiring for those who live on the island. The urban transport priority card for residents is also seen as ineffective, again contributing to growing discontent with a city they feel has forgotten them. In short, Murano is experienced as an island within an island, not only geographically but also socio-economically and politically, increasingly distant from decision-making centres and urban planning decisions. And so, here too, accessibility is a broken promise.

3.3. Difficult Modernisation in Central Sardinia

More than an hour from the nearest coastline, in the hinterland of Sardinia, Gennargentu-Mandrolisai is a mountainous archipelago of small municipalities linked by sometimes difficult roads, divided between the mountains of Gennargentu and the hills of Mandrolisai. Made up of eleven municipalities and classified as an "inner area" by the SNAI, Gennargentu-Mandrolisai has experienced a gradual but steady decline, not only on a demographic level but also in economic and institutional terms. However, as we shall see later, this is counterbalanced by a vibrant community life.

The socio-territorial and economic development of this area can be read as part of the "difficult modernisation" that has characterised Sardinia (Uleri et al. 2023), which can be understood as a result of a top-down approach to policy making. Between the 1960s and 1980s, Sardinia's modernisation was accentuated by attempts at industrialisation "from above", such as the creation of the Arbatax paper mill and the Ottana petrochemical complex, financed by the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (Southern Development Fund). Although initially promising, these projects were cumbersome and ultimately failed, leaving inner areas marginalised (Uleri et al. 2023). One of the outcomes of this process was the "doughnut effect", that is, a demographic and socio-economic imbalance between the coastal and inner areas of the island. The former have seen tendential growth in the population and services, while inner areas—such as Gennargentu-Mandrolisai—suffered depopulation, a decrease in social activities and infrastructures, partial abandonment of the land and landscape modification.

Although the negative dynamics attributable to "difficult modernisation" have not disappeared, various studies show that they have now taken on new forms due to the post-2008 economic crisis. Farinella and Podda (2020) demonstrate the significant impact that

the economic crisis has had on rural welfare, exacerbating the dynamics of marginalisation that already existed in rural areas. The reduction in public spending and essential services has triggered a vicious circle of depopulation, demographic ageing, employment decline and increased poverty. Consequent migration from inner areas to coastal urban centres has further confirmed the "doughnut effect" or "centrifugal effect" (Uleri et al. 2023).

While over the years population loss and declining agricultural productivity have led to a reduction in agricultural holdings and an impoverishment of territorial capital, and despite the difficulties related to modernisation, the inner areas of Sardinia have maintained a strong agricultural vocation, creating typical PDO and PGI products that represent excellence at a national level and have links to international markets, such as North America, through the value chains of the dairy industry (Farinella and Simula 2024). Thus, local communities have activated untapped local resources in response to the difficulties they face, organising complex networks between institutional actors, agricultural businesses and civil society. This has given rise to a new model of rural welfare, based on "nested markets" that link economic development with social cohesion (Farinella and Podda 2020).

3.4. Gennargentu-Mandrolisai: Disintegrated Communities and Sense of Belonging

According to Formez (2023), the inner area of Gennargentu-Mandrolisai experienced a population decline of −12.96% between 2011 and 2020, accompanied by significant population ageing, with the old-age index estimated at 246 in 2023, significantly higher than the national average of 193.3. Furthermore, Sardinia's regional dossier for the 2021–2027 planning period indicated an average per capita income of EUR 13,650 in 2018.

Schools are clearly suffering. The constant turnover of teachers, experienced as pedagogical instability, is a cause for concern for parents and pupils alike. As one teacher put it, "Children don't form bonds with their teachers. Their methods change, their faces change. Every year is like starting again from scratch". Furthermore, children are commonly put into mixed-age classrooms, often without specialist staff. This can be seen not simply as a logistical adaptation but as a complete renunciation of equal education, which translates into lower prospects for younger generations. On top of this, a lack of extracurricular activities and workshops in the area makes it even harder for young people to imagine a future there, with many leaving to study and never coming back. Those who do stay struggle to get by in a situation that is very demanding and gives little back in return.

The issue of employment was felt particularly keenly by the young people interviewed but also by older generations who have noticed a decrease in job opportunities in the area. There are few stable jobs, and those that do exist are almost always linked to agriculture or small catering businesses. The industrial past—shaped by the proximity of the Ottana petrochemical plant—seems like "A distant dream (...) My father worked there, and at school they trained us for that world. Today, that world no longer exists," a retired industrial worker told us.

Just as in many other regions in Italy and Europe, there was high industrial investment in Sardinia in the post-war period. Gennargentu-Mandrolisai was affected by this development when a petrochemical industrial hub was built in Ottana, a town located about 30 min away by car. This brought numerous benefits to the area, providing job opportunities and leading to the establishment of formal courses to train people in the skills needed for the new labour market. As a local resident pointed out, policy makers and local administrators at the time had a clear sense of socio-economic and territorial development, linking education to work:

> [In the 1970s] I studied at a school in Tonara that had been founded as part of the development plan for central Sardinia, a role that the municipality of Tonara

> had created for itself. The school, supported by politicians from Tonara and other important and intelligent people, created a technical institute for chemists in Tonara. A large part of the technical team at Ottana came from that institute.

The owners of farms or wineries are sometimes able to engage in forms of entrepreneurship, but here too we find significant inequalities, with only those who already have their own capital able to access public funds. According to a young man who owns a farm, public funding "can give you a non-repayable grant of up to 60%, which is a fantastic opportunity, but, of course, you have to put up the remaining 40% yourself. Now, for someone like me who runs a small or medium-sized business, without the cash flow of a large company, finding that 40% is a huge challenge".

The issue of mobility in an area like Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, which is mountainous and made up of many small municipalities, is crucial from both a social and economic point of view. Roads are poor, and public transport is inadequate, with insufficient runs. At least outside of school hours when buses are guaranteed by the regional transport agency ARST, in the mountainous areas of central Sardinia, private cars are the main means for reaching your workplace, accessing health services and attending social events. But precisely because cars are the main option, this acts as an exclusionary mechanism for those who cannot drive, do not have a car or who are dependent on public transport, such as people with disabilities. This emerged in several interviews with both residents and stakeholders. For example, according to a librarian in a small town in the Mandrolisai hills, "almost everyone gets their driving licence when they turn 18. It is impossible to look for work without a driving licence". This need was also expressed by an employee at the local job centre, who said that not having a driving licence "is a major problem. The first thing I say to them when they come in, especially young people, is, 'First get your driving licence because [otherwise] you're not going anywhere'. They can't do anything, its limiting, you can't work if you don't have a driving licence, because if you find a job in Simaxis, near Oristano, you have to live in Simaxis because you can't get there by public transport".

According to Formez, the average distance of municipalities in the inner area of Gennargentu-Mandrolisai from the nearest municipality node (Oristano) is 69.59 min by car, whereas the regional average for other internal areas of the whole of Sardinia is 52.17 min and the national average is 45.15 min (Formez 2023). The dependence on cars is not a choice but a necessity imposed by a system that has disinvested in all other forms of transport (Mattioli et al. 2020). This infrastructural constraint, or lock-in, produces inequalities that further reinforce income, gender, age and other inequalities.

In relation to digitalisation and the improvement of internet connectivity, neither the empirical data collected during the research nor the data provided by Formez paint an entirely positive picture. For example, at the regional level, high-speed fixed network coverage (30 Mbit/s and 100 Mbit/s) is only 19.49%. However, the mobile network is more promising, with 94.92% of the population having access to connections with speeds equal to or greater than 30 Mbit/s (Formez 2023). One interviewee with a visual impairment recognised the potential of digitalisation to reduce some of the barriers faced by people with disabilities and to increase their inclusion in society and the workplace and pointed to the limitations of network coverage and digital skills, especially in rural areas. For example, she praised Apple's technology for visually impaired users, which has enabled her to gain greater independence, but also stressed the need for a more robust digital infrastructure: "Digital infrastructure [. . .] is pretty inadequate. It is important to create more training courses, especially in this area".

According to the owner of a bar in one of the most populous villages in Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, although fibre optic cables have been installed, "they are not in operation [. . .] an upgrade like that would add real value to the area". Furthermore, he argued that social

media gives residents the chance to raise awareness about the beauty of the area, helping to overcome a certain sense of isolation. Social media also helps to reduce parochialism, especially among young people, by encouraging cooperation between different municipalities: "Social media [...] helps to break down the parochialism that existed in previous generations". Indeed, in this difficult context, there are also some positive signs: a number of young agricultural entrepreneurs have used social networks to increase their visibility. As one local producer told us, "An American found my business on Google Maps and spent eight days here. This gives us hope". Digitalisation, if supported by adequate infrastructure and within a development framework consistent with local needs, can be an important factor in improving local resources.

Today social relations appear caught in a dialectical tension between rarefaction and attempts to keep them alive through the promotion of traditions, local cultural practices and forms of sustainable tourism. In this context, participation in community life often depends on actions of a few people. The lack of alternative meeting places and the absence of stable cultural initiatives mean bars are the only places where people meet up, generating a void in social life, especially among the young. As a young woman from a mountain village told us, "At the end of the day, the only real meeting place is the bar. You go to the bar, have a drink, which could be seen as a positive thing, but I see it more as a negative".

Parochialism also emerges as a significant obstacle to institutional cooperation. "If one town organises a concert, the other boycotts it. It's always been like that," says a former mayor. This fragmentation prevents the pooling of resources and hinders the development of shared projects. However, there are also positive experiences: the Mandrolisai consortium, formed by local winegrowers, shows that it is possible to overcome rivalries in favour of a development that is sensitive to local crafts. As a young wine producer told us, "We are moving forward as a team, also thanks to social media. We want to promote our wine outside Sardinia." Thus, owing in part to grassroots initiatives, a generational change is taking place that moves away from old parochialisms and towards a shared identity. As a young local agricultural and wine producer observed, "in all villages now, new agricultural businesses talk about Mandrolisai, not just their own municipality". According to this interviewee, this shared identity could facilitate support actions in their favour. However, he also stressed that local unity alone "is not enough; political will is needed to stop us being treated like second-class citizens".

3.5. Mobilisations Against Territorial Inequalities

In both contexts analysed, some local people have engaged in collective responses and forms of resistance to territorial inequalities. These mobilisations, often led by non-institutional local actors, demonstrate a clear capacity to act autonomously. In the following paragraphs we will focus on a number of grassroots experiences aimed at mitigating territorial inequalities. In Murano, the Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano, the Murano Benefica association and Mamme per Murano are all examples of voluntary mobilisation and activism to address institutional shortcomings in certain essential services such as healthcare and mobility. In Gennargentu-Mandrolisai, we identified two significant experiences of civic activism: the Comitato SOS Sanità Barbagia-Mandrolisai and the local feminist collective AvvoLotadoras.

3.5.1. Murano: Marginalisation in the Centre

Despite the crisis, Murano retains fragments of vibrant community life. The Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano, the parish, and youth sports all provide vital spaces in which sociality is encouraged, knowledge is shared, and a sense of belonging is nurtured.

Due to its distance from local and national institutions, forms of mutual aid and horizontal solidarity have been created over the years.

One of the most significant is the Mamme per Murano association, which was created to organise events for children and to ensure the community remained active. Far from being a simple network of volunteers, the association has adopted a mediating role between families and institutions and has influenced important political decisions on several occasions, including the reopening of the nursery and the saving of school classes threatened by mergers. As one of the founders stated, "we decided to intervene because the local councils were getting less effective; someone had to take care of the community".

As well as Mamme per Murano, the Murano Benefica association, relaunched through the Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano, offers free wheelchairs, walkers and home care equipment to locals: "if you break your leg, come to us and we'll give you a wheelchair. Free of charge, without any red tape," says a volunteer proudly. Such forms of mutual aid do not replace the state and local authorities but do play a compensatory role, demonstrating the community's ability to stand on its own two feet despite institutional neglect.

Founded in 2022, the Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano is another fundamental hub of Murano's resistance to marginalisation. Initially created as a space for elderly people who had no places left to socialise, it quickly grew to over 240 members, becoming a reference point for intergenerational activities. It organises digital literacy courses for senior citizens, cultural evenings, museum visits, recreational activities and educational projects in collaboration with schools, including with the Istituto Abate Zanetti, in an attempt to reconnect young people with Murano's glassmaking tradition.

This experience demonstrates the importance of informal social infrastructure in maintaining the cohesion of communities marginalised by urban policies. However, as Vitale Brovarone (2022) argues, these initiatives, however virtuous, risk becoming substitutes for the state, consolidating a fragile autonomy that relies on the commitment of a few and the erosion of the social contract. In short, these practices cannot replace public action and, if anything, reveal the extremity of institutional distances.

Some annual events, such as the "May Day Olympics"—a sports day for young people from Murano and other municipalities in the city—or the cultural trips organised by the Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano, still offer significant opportunities for socialising. However, the lack of support from local government makes it difficult for them to keep going. Added to this are more complex social dynamics: some young people complain of a "closed" atmosphere, hostile to cultural pluralism and impervious to social change. As one mother told us, "My younger son had to change schools to feel at home. Here, if you're different, they let you know it".

This dualism—between cohesion and closure, solidarity and individualism, belonging and escape—paints an ambivalent picture of social life in Murano. It is a community that survives, but with difficulty, that comes together, but with difficulty, that still refers to itself as an "us", but fears that this "us" is disappearing.

3.5.2. Gennargentu-Mandrolisai: Resistance in the Hinterland

The Gennargentu-Mandrolisai area is an example of structural territorial marginalisation, where processes of depopulation, ageing and cuts in public services are met with deep-rooted social resistance. In this context, collective action has taken various forms, often led by non-institutional local actors mobilising against threats to health, education and mobility.

Gennargentu-Mandrolisai has seen a partial revival of agricultural work, but without any real political support: this so-called "re-agrarianisation" is happening in the absence of services, infrastructure and training. According to Uleri et al. (2023), younger generations

are playing a crucial role in inland agriculture, contributing to territorial regeneration and a transition to multifunctional models. Through innovative business ideas, such as the recovery of ancient crop varieties, social agriculture, experiential tourism and educational farms, they are expanding the range of goods and services on offer, improving sustainability and increasing the local economy. Their actions are focused on the recovery of local capital, enhancing the area's natural and cultural resources, taking care of abandoned land and preserving biodiversity, all of which have positive effects on the landscape and reduce hydrogeological risk. They also promote the reconnection between inner areas and cities, creating short supply chains and local markets that strengthen the rural economy and promote conscious consumption. Many choose agriculture as their first option, attracted by the autonomy of work and the quality of rural life, while those who take over family businesses update production practices to adapt to new market demands. Finally, they enhance local specificities by preserving typical agri-food products and traditions, thus contributing to the diversity and uniqueness of the territory, addressing challenges such as depopulation and building a sustainable and integrated future.

These people act as social innovators in numerous ways: they operate as hubs for local networks, create new solutions to meet community needs, seek to combine economic impact and social responsibility, and aim to improve local resources and create a dialogue between different actors (Farinella and Podda 2020). These are not "heroic individuals" but a subset of the population that acts in specific contexts who are able to empower other people and activities (Barbera and Parisi 2019), such as multifunctional agricultural businesses, social cooperatives and activists, who often consciously choose to remain or put down roots in the local area. Their role is crucial to building collaborative networks, generating nested markets and encouraging social inclusion, employment and sustainability. This clearly emerged in the interview with the director of the Barbagia-Gennargentu-Mandrolisai local action group, who argued that organisations such as hers are potential agents of change, despite often feeling excluded from decisions affecting their area. Although there are public initiatives that aim to involve local populations in the decision-making process, they are often viewed with mistrust due to the bureaucracy they involve and the delays experienced in achieving tangible results. However, there are signs of optimism linked to the awareness that cooperation between different municipalities could be key to change. As the director of the local action group points out, "there is a growing awareness that going it alone is no longer feasible, and that integrated strategies are needed, thinking as a territory and not as individual municipalities". However, she also points out that the changes that do take place in the area are often the result of fragmented interventions rather than long-term integrated strategies. European and regional policies have sought to support the region of Sardinia, but bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of dialogue with local communities have often hampered the effectiveness of these interventions: "many interventions in the agricultural and rural sector have been largely in the sign of welfarism, and not integrated into a long-term strategy".

The hospital in Sorgono, once considered a key service for the whole area, is now a tangible symbol of the decline of public services on both a state and regional level. Reductions in staff, the closure of the maternity ward and gradual cuts in its healthcare facilities have created a huge sense of frustration and mistrust among locals. The area's lack of appeal to healthcare professionals is attributed to a combination of geographical isolation, lack of services, and an absence of structural incentives. "Today, it is half the hospital it was. You wonder if it will still be there tomorrow," said a representative of the Comitato SOS Sanità Barbagia-Mandrolisai. The distance from the remaining facilities that are still in use (Nuoro or Oristano, over an hour's drive away), often reachable only on very poor roads, means that the right to health is felt to be a broken promise.

It was in this context that the Comitato SOS Sanità Barbagia-Mandrolisai was formed. It was founded in 2021 following a personal medical emergency involving one of its representatives: "I started it after my wife had an anaphylactic shock. The doctor told me, 'There's nothing we can do for you here'. That's when I realised what it really means to be abandoned." The Comitato quickly became a leading voice in the fight against the decline of healthcare services in the region, representing a concrete example of grassroots mobilisation. The committee has combined symbolic actions with formal avenues for voicing their demands, making use of Ministerial Decree 70/2015, which gives specific protections to disadvantaged areas. Its activities range from public demonstrations to daily protests in local municipalities, as well as a strong media presence and ongoing dialogue with institutions.

Putting on around thirty events in less than two years, the Comitato has brought various problems to public attention: the lack of emergency facilities, difficulties in accessing specialist care and chronic staff shortages. These issues are an infrastructural deficit and a systemic obstacle to a dignified life in inner areas. At the same time, the Comitato has promoted the use of telemedicine, now supported by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), and pushed for the spread of community nursing, while recognising that these interventions are insufficient to guarantee health equity.

Every Thursday, public meetings known as "Gio-vediamoci" (let's meet on Thursday) are held in front of the hospital. These are moments of protest but also of collective care for the area. However, participation remains strongly generational: the elderly take centre stage, while young people, who have often emigrated or are disillusioned, remain on the sidelines.

The founding of the feminist collective AvvoLotadoras is a response to the dual "invisibility" of women in the area: geographical invisibility, resulting from territorial marginalisation, and systemic invisibility, linked to persistent gender inequalities. The collective AvvoLotadoras provides a space for reflection and activism in a context of cuts to services combined with social expectations that women will take on the role of primary caregivers. The members of the collective we interviewed told us it operates informally and as an assembly: "we meet in a very open way, like a kind of semi-public assembly, open to all". Their spokesperson described how they attempt to adapt the concepts of intersectional feminism to a local context that is culturally resistant to such issues. More specifically, the collective aims to raise awareness of these matters and promote inclusive dialogue. As one representative told us, "our goal is to bring the concept of intersectionality to this region, beginning from the basics of feminism. If someone does not even know what a patriarchal society is, obviously these concepts seem foreign to them. At the same time, we try to adapt our language to the local context".

However, participation remains limited, probably due to a lack of awareness of pluralism among the local population. Another difficulty is the involvement of women themselves, as "even using inclusive Italian in this region seems unrealistic". These problems reflect the influence of cultural norms, which lead to a low acceptance of pluralism. Cultural resistance to feminism and gender issues, both among women and in general in the local community, thus remains a significant obstacle.

Despite being fairly new, the collective has already organised a number of significant events, such as a demonstration for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. One interviewee described the work ahead of them: "We managed to organise an amazing demonstration for 25 November 2023, immediately after the case of the feminicide of Giulia Cecchettin. There was a huge turnout, but in general there is a reluctance to speak out, a kind of reticence about taking the initiative". This reticence extends to issues concerning the intersection between class and gender, which the collective

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recognises as crucial to addressing inequalities: "We've understood that class inequality is a fundamental problem here. Without addressing that, it is difficult to bring the issue of gender inequality to the fore." Intersectionality has become a cornerstone of the collective's advocacy work.

Although women from different generations have gotten involved, involving men remains a significant challenge: "We have not yet managed to interest men, despite proposing topics that also concern them. It's a cultural issue here in central Sardinia". The rural context adds to the problem, such as the disproportionate burden shouldered by women in caring for children and the elderly in the absence of adequate services. "Women here have the additional burden of caring for both children and the elderly. Without nurseries or other support from the public sector, working mothers face massive challenges," pointed out one activist from the collective.

In conclusion, the collective is committed to overcoming cultural barriers and creating a space for a critical discussion on gender inequality, class dynamics and women's health, which is a crucial step towards social and cultural change in rural areas of Sardinia. As one participant observed, "we are working first to raise awareness among ourselves, to understand the barriers we face, and then to integrate ourselves into a society that is fairly closed but nevertheless responsive to the right initiatives".

4. Discussion and Final Observations on Public Policies and Grassroots Practices

The findings of the research reflect what the literature has called "peripheralisation", the relational and dynamic process in which spaces are marginalised in relation to a perceived centre (Mullis 2025). This is not just a geographical position but a social, economic and political condition that implies dependence, exclusion and inequality. Peripheralisation reveals that the centre and the periphery are products of power relations, in which the centre is considered the norm and the periphery as inferior.

With respect to current debates on territorial inequalities, the findings of our research highlight their heterogeneous, multifaceted, layered, and dynamic nature, unfolding within a framework of persistent historical continuity. Accordingly, these results call for an omnidirectional approach to the study of territorial inequalities—one that takes into account their multiple forms and dimensions. This, in turn, implies, at the level of policy, the need for comprehensive public interventions capable of addressing such complexity.

Moreover, the research underlines the importance of a bottom-up and situated approach to territorial inequalities. It shows that local inhabitants are not merely passive recipients but actively reinterpret and contest both the forms that territorial inequalities take and the public policies designed to address them, which are often perceived as inadequate.

The processes of marginalisation observed in the cases of Murano and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai cannot be understood solely in geographical or demographic terms. These places are marked by a gradual loss of institutional, economic and symbolic centrality, in which marginalisation or peripheralisation is not a natural destiny but the historical and political product of a number of systematic choices. As Rodríguez-Pose (2018) points out, left-behind places have not simply fallen behind but have been left behind by policies that have excluded them from national and supranational development.

The empirical research confirms what is found in the recent literature on territorial inequalities: although the discontent and sense of abandonment in inner and "marginal" areas is often transformed into a demand for social support, they also develop responses of a different nature, in the form of a "third way" focused on emancipation (Carrosio 2019). This perspective offers an alternative to both the commodification of "borghi romantici" (romantic villages) and simple dependence on state aid. In this way, "marginal" places

become spaces for criticism and social experimentation. The focus shifts from income to quality of life, seeking sustainable and local solutions that transform ways of "building community" at the territorial level (Carrosio 2019).

In Gennargentu-Mandrolisai and Murano, constant cuts to essential services have heavily affected the relationship between citizens and their area. The downsizing of the hospital in Sorgono is not only a health issue but is also a political and collective problem: the whole area has seen the loss of a key facility that acted as a guarantee of citizenship. In Murano, the scarcity of health, education and social services is felt even more acutely due to a constant comparison with the excessive attention given to tourist flows. While in the first case marginalisation is associated with abandonment, in the second it is experienced as dispossession: being at the centre but feeling that you count for nothing. These territorial inequalities are thus not limited to access to clinics or schools but profoundly shape life conditions.

Both areas are socially vibrant, with high civic capital capable of creating inclusive initiatives, intergenerational events and everyday solidarity. But these forms of local resistance are not enough. Without institutional recognition and a structural alliance between public policies and grassroots practices, they risk becoming temporary solutions to systemic problems.

Murano and Gennargentu-Mandrolisai present us with two different images of marginalised territories that are not giving up. Both raise the issue of the right not only to access services but to be part of a collective project. As demonstrated by the Circolo Ricreativo e Culturale Murano, the civic committees for health, and the feminist collective AvvoLotadoras in Sardinia, residents are asking for recognition, to be listened to, and to be given resources. Marginalisation is not a destiny, but to combat it, new alliances are needed between territories and institutions and between care practices and policies on spatial justice.

Another issue that emerged in the research, which is sometimes overlooked, is local dignity. In both case studies, residents not only demand services or investment but also the right to stay, to exist, and to matter. Mutual aid practices, cultural projects and local business initiatives demonstrate attempts to build a future without having to leave. However, as the literature on inner areas makes clear, these forms of resistance cannot replace policies; they are signs of life, not alternatives to public intervention.

Finally, an observation on language and representations. Talking about "marginalised places" and "disadvantaged areas" often implies a reification or naturalisation of inequality. But the areas discussed here are neither empty nor passive. They are full of relationships, skills, knowledge and desires. It is political recognition that is lacking. Place-based policies, such as the SNAI, have attempted to fill this void but have often run aground in bureaucracy, participatory rhetoric, sectoral solutions, and a lack of financial support and project continuity. Following the place-based approach to combatting territorial inequalities, the point is not to do something for left-behind places but to do something with left-behind places, recognising their specificities, forms of local knowledge and questions about the future that they face. This is because marginality is not only a material condition but also a relationship. And it can only be transformed if that relationship is rethought, redistributed, and imbued with justice.

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Notes

1. The source for data on average income in Venice is: https://www.ripensarevenezia.it/comune-di-venezia-la-mappa-dei-redditi (accessed on 20 October 2025).
2. The “1 euro houses” are abandoned properties, often in small villages at risk of depopulation, sold by Italian municipalities at a symbolic price of 1 euro. The goal is to revitalise these areas, requiring buyers renovate the property within a set timeframe and sometimes to stay in the village.

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