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A spatial justice perspective on EU rural sustainability as territorial cohesion

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Abstract

Territorial cohesion is a guiding set of EU principles to achieve sustainable development. However, evidence suggests that within and across rural and peripheral regions in particular, prosperity and social and economic wellbeing continue to lag behind other regions. The aim of this article is to examine how a spatial justice perspective can provide new development insights on rural sustainability. Introducing a spatial justice perspective to a sustainability/territorial cohesion view of rural development, this article explores the scope for alternative framings of rural sustainability based on more place-based, context-specific socio-spatial relations and processes. Drawing on interviews with EU-based stakeholders mainly representing rural-based NGOs, it identifies changing values and priorities about rural sustainability linked to notions of spatial justice and fairness. The findings illustrate an evolving local-level emphasis on rural sustainability as a phenomenon less focused on economic growth and as much on achieving social equity, with associated capacity to frame and agree locally relevant sustainability goals in an inclusive and respectful way.

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KEYWORDS

development, rural, spatial justice, sustainability, territorial cohesion

INTRODUCTION

The European Union's recent long-term vision for rural areas has highlighted the challenges facing policymakers and stakeholders in managing rural sustainability in socially and spatially equitable ways. The principle of territorial cohesion has been central to the EU's approach to regional and rural policy, seeking spatial convergence through sustainable development that balances economic, environmental and social objectives (Weckroth & Moisisio, 2020). Yet, there are continuing rural–urban and intra-rural disparities in regional prosperity, with peripheral and predominantly rural regions persistently positioned as lagging regions (Woods et al., 2021).

Tensions within the EU's discourse of territorial cohesion and complex structures through which it has been delivered, including separate regional development and rural development programmes, have been critiqued by commentators. Sarmiento-Mirwaldt (2015) and Weckroth and Moisisio (2020) highlight the often-contradictory meanings of 'territorial cohesion' that could relate to a mode of governance, a normative policy objective or a spatial framework, allowing conflicting interpretation and application. Faludi (2013, 2018) has argued that its acceptance of pre-defined territorial boundaries fails to recognise how regions are 'always in the making'; whilst Dabinett (2010, 2011) and Hadjimichalis (2011, 2020) criticise the neoliberal design of EU Structural Funds programmes as accentuating already existing uneven development experiences between economically better and worse off regions.

Such shortcomings have become more acute as increasing emphasis is placed on the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability, notably in the context of the climate crisis. The notion that territorial cohesion is achieved by rebalancing economic growth across regions is coming under pressure from competing perspectives that emphasize wider wellbeing and even advocate de-growth (Jones et al., 2019). EU policies and programmes have been critiqued for over-reliance on macroeconomic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and for downplaying more qualitative place-based values and perspectives on development (Jones et al., 2019; Weckroth & Moisisio, 2020). At the same time, McCann and Soete (2020) point out that initiatives such as the European Green Deal could place vulnerable regions at further disadvantage if not mediated by specific place-based actions and interventions that balance climate mitigation strategies with achievable local sustainability options. Retaining a commitment to principles of territorial cohesion suggests a reformulation of sustainability that is morally and ethically grounded (Gomis et al., 2011).

These debates have significant implications for rural regions in Europe. On the one hand, the relative standing of rural regions may be re-evaluated, with greater recognition afforded to their environmental resources and qualities. On the other hand, an emphasis on environmental qualities might obscure material disadvantage and curtail the capacity of rural regions to address these, whilst rural localities may also be vulnerable to new forms of capitalist exploitation that override local interests. As such, a morally and ethically grounded approach to rural sustainability needs to foreground questions of *fairness* in its territorial expression.

This article accordingly aims to examine how a spatial justice perspective can provide new development insights on rural development and sustainability. By introducing a spatial justice

perspective to a sustainability/territorial cohesion view of rural development, we explore the scope for an alternative framing of rural sustainability based on a more place-based, context-specific socio-spatial relations and processes. In this, notions of sustainability are informed by societal values shaping citizens' expectations of what is just and explanations for experienced or perceived spatial inequalities are found in the relational nature of rural regional development; for example, the diversity, quality and reach of a rural region's relations of connectivity across space. Citizens are recognised not as passive recipients of policies and programmes but as co-producers of sustainability strategies and essential actors in ensuring their successful implementation.

The next section provides a critique of sustainability and territorial cohesion from a relational values perspective, followed by a brief review of spatial justice as it relates to cohesion. The article subsequently draws on interviews with EU-based stakeholders who represent rural-based NGOs to explore their experiences of rural development; the changing values around rural sustainability; how spatial injustice is manifest for them through levels of public service provision and other governance issues; and how it shapes their perspectives on the sustainability of rural areas within the EU.

SUSTAINABILITY, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SPATIAL JUSTICE — A RELATIONAL VALUES PERSPECTIVE

Sustainability, territorial cohesion and justice

Sustainability has become a ubiquitous concept in scientific, policy, political and popular discourses to the point that it has been criticised for vague idealism that limits its usefulness (Campbell, 1996; Robinson, 2004). The derivative notion of 'sustainable development', most influentially articulated by the Brundtland Commission in 1987, has in particular been adopted as the proclaimed aim of regional and rural development strategies but has been increasingly critiqued for embodying an arguably contradictory accommodation between economic growth and ecological resilience and for failing to confront issues of power, privilege and exploitation that impact on human wellbeing (Levin Keitel et al., 2018; Robinson, 2004). More radical perspectives critique neoliberalism and capitalism, advocate degrowth and connect sustainability with ideas of justice (Agyeman et al., 2002; Krähmer, 2021; MacGregor, 2006; Muraca & Döring, 2019).

Associating sustainability and justice implies a commitment to social equality as a form of distributive justice rooted in understandings of fairness and equity in access to the resources needed to sustain life and in the impacts of their exploitation. Thus, 'environmental justice' has been deployed as a concept to highlight the social inequalities within and between communities in access to resources such as land, food and water or in exposure to pollution or noxious activities. As Ashwood and MacTavish (2016) observe, rural localities are frequently sites of environmental injustice. However, understandings of 'fairness' and 'justice' depend on subjective value judgments that are socially constructed and may vary between locales and scales (Daniels, 1996; Miller, 1999; Rawls, 1971; Sabbagh, 2003). Mason and Milbourne's (2014) discussion of 'landscape justice' in relation to a windfarm development, for example, highlights disjuncture in what was perceived as 'fair' for the local landscape and community and for the global society.

Combining sustainability and territorial cohesion therefore needs to pay attention not only to the spatial effects of policies and programmes but also to the ways in which the values that inform perceptions of (in)justice are differentially constructed in affected regions. Previous research on values with respect to sustainability has covered a range of conceptualisations, applications and

approaches to assessment (Raymond et al., 2019). Kenter et al. (2015) broadly divide values into categories of individual, social/shared and relational. Individual values are associated with more instrumental or economic approaches to valuation (*ibid.*). Here, value to society is typically identified by policymakers by aggregating individual valuations, assuming that they reflect underlying preferences and values (*ibid.*). While important to assessing values, this approach can ignore collective meanings or shared dimensions of value, in, for example, a natural environment or some facet of community life; hence, the category of social or shared values. The social values approach instead favours shared and collective dimensions and meanings of value, linked to socialisation within a particular society, and awareness of the impacts that individual behaviour has on others (Gould et al., 2019). The meanings of relational values are also derived from contextual and place-based influences and pertain to the 'preferences, principles, and virtues associated with relationships, both interpersonal and as articulated by policies and social norms' (Chan et al., 2016, p. 1462, 2018). Relational values are particularly relevant to place-based research where local insights and alternative world views are acknowledged to contribute to sustainability while reflecting the issues that matter most to citizens in their achievement of social equality within these specific place-based contexts (*ibid.*). Research using relational and social value concepts has been applied increasingly in studies on environmental and ecological sustainability in ways that broaden ideas and discourses of values with a view to enhancing sustainability policy- and decision-making practices. It reflects a growing awareness of multiple values and knowledge systems that influence social acceptance of sustainability policies and strategies.

Bringing in spatial justice

The concept of spatial justice has been strongly associated with research on social injustice in the city (Dikeç, 2001; Fainstein, 2014; Harvey, 1973; Lefebvre, 1968; Soja, 2008, 2010), with more recent contributions to extending its application to regional and rural contexts (Demeterova et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Landy & Moreau, 2015; Nordberg, 2020; Shucksmith et al., 2021; Woods, 2019). In the urban literature, spatial justice has been defined as 'the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially-valued resources and the opportunities to use them' (Soja, 2008, p. 3), as well as the right to take part in those processes that shape the socio-spatial context, and how those processes can be contested (Dikeç, 2001; Lefebvre, 1968). Taking the starting point that space is itself constituted by social relations and as such any investigation of social injustice must include the influence of spatial dimensions and processes, this work has examined a socio-spatial dialectic to reveal how underlying power dynamics work through spatial as well as social contexts, creating differing societal experiences of (in)justice and (in)equality in the city (Soja, 2008, 2010).

The emerging literature on rural and regional spatial justice has not only stretched the geographical scope of the term but has also elaborated its conceptualisation to further emphasize spatial justice as the capacity of citizens to pursue development paths that deliver a certain quality of life in a place and that also rhyme with their perceptions of fairness and justice. It reflects 'the right to difference' (Demeterova et al., 2020, p. 6; see also Lefebvre, 1968; Young, 1990): the right of individuals or groups to achieve development and a 'good life' (*ibid.*), where difference means taking account of context-specific understandings of justness and capabilities to act (including unequal power contexts) and where development policies recognise and facilitate 'differing, regionally-anchored definitions of success' (p. 6)—an approach that includes place-based degrowth or post-growth perspectives. On citizens' capacity to realise such rights, Demeterova et al. (*ibid.*) identify two dimensions of spatial justice: horizontal aspects of justice that address issues of access

to and provision of resources such as institutions, services, markets and infrastructure and vertical aspects that relate to participative capabilities in power relations 'to avoid dependency, dominance and oppression' (p. 19) and to change the parameters about what constitute established measures of progress.

Applying a spatial justice lens draws attention to the values assumed in the formulation and delivery of EU territorial cohesion policies, including the interpretation of sustainability and sustainable development within these, and to other manifestations of injustice that arise as a consequence (Jones et al., 2019; Weckroth & Moisio, 2020). For example, the distribution and evaluation of regional development funds to pre-defined bounded administrative units and on the basis of macroeconomic indicators such as GDP have been shown to skew benefits and mask social and spatial variations at lower levels of aggregation (Faludi, 2018). Similarly, the competitiveness agenda has favoured processes of urbanisation and agglomeration without evenly distributing the benefits of this growth and in some cases has reproduced conditions of disadvantage experienced by certain places and social groups (Demeterova et al., 2020; Dikeç, 2001; Nordberg, 2020; Storper, 2011).

Connecting discourses of rural sustainability to a rural spatial justice agenda

Linking sustainability and justice agendas can present challenges around differences in discursive frames and how these are accessed and used by different actors. Agyeman et al. (2002), for instance, show that the concerns of sustainability and environmental justice advocates are discursively different and constructed from contrasting directions, with sustainability frames tending to emerge from the top-down and environmental justice frames articulating bottom-up grievances. Similar issues arise around combining rural sustainability and spatial justice, especially when further grounded in the context of rural development. These three domains each have their own discursive frames, reflecting different core values.

Conventionally, rural development has been framed in economic terms, informed by an enduring spatial imaginary in which lagging rural regions are presented as needing to catch up with dynamic urban economies (Bresnihan & Hesse, 2020). Here, sustainable development is often presented as a matter of economic success or failure, with success linked to urban progress and modernity versus rural decline and backwardness (ibid.). Such framings deflect emphasis away from critiques of the place-specific usefulness of sustainable development policies (Jones et al., 2020; Weckroth & Moisio, 2020; Woods, 2019). Earlier top-down models of intervention have been displaced by an emphasis on bottom-up neo-endogenous rural development, commonly delivered through neoliberal modes of governance, such that values of economic equity are tempered by values of market-based solutions and individual responsibility, leading to geographically variegated outcomes (Georgios et al., 2021; Shucksmith, 2010). The shift to the new rural development paradigm has also facilitated engagement with sustainability discourses and more notably in later years the inclusion of environmental and wellbeing values alongside economic values in strategies for sustainable development (OECD, 2006, 2016, 2019). These have reconfigured the objectives of rural economic development towards engaging with the emerging eco-economy, often reflecting values of global solidarity with rural regions positioned as providing resources and services to address the climate crisis and other global environmental threats (Horlings & Marsden, 2014). In national or regional policy terms, however, these discourses have also frequently deployed the rhetoric of bottom-up action to exhort rural communities to step

up and take control of a future already compromised by disproportionate place-specific impacts of underinvestment, austerity, migration, globalization and urbanization (Halseth et al., 2019; Woods, 2019). Copus and Dax (2010) furthermore observe that rural development policy aspirations at the EU level often fail to translate into more concrete national or regional programmes to meet actual rural needs because of institutional inertia at various levels and a tendency to retain existing measures.

Spatial justice, in contrast, is centrally concerned with power and the perceived fairness of policy processes and outcomes. There are nonetheless multiple intersections with the trajectory of rural sustainable development. Rural development programmes have sought to address inequalities in the spatial distribution of economic resources, whilst sustainability actions have targeted injustices in the impacts of environmentally degrading activities. Spatial justice can further highlight disparities in access to services and infrastructure, including as a consequence of austerity policies, that undermine the social sustainability of rural communities (Bernard et al., 2019; Nordberg, 2020). Initiatives such as rural proofing (Atterton, 2022) or the LEADER programme (Shucksmith et al., 2021) have embodied spatial justice values as they have sought to correct bias in policies and empower community-led development. Yet, critiques have identified limitations to these instruments, with Sherry and Shortall (2019) criticising rural proofing for reproducing a reductive rural/urban binary and Shucksmith et al. (2021) pointing to the disempowering effect of governments centrally steering rural development policies and excluding local knowledge and resourcefulness.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on research in the Horizon 2020 IMAJINE project, applying the concept of spatial justice to explore how territorial inequalities within the EU can be more effectively addressed. The article draws on a series of 18 qualitative interviews (out of a total of 25 sought) with representatives of national, regional and local-based NGOs along with one regional government representative who provided insights into everyday understandings of spatial justice as they pertained to their organisations' or department's particular sectoral interests. The interviews formed part of evidence collection for a work package on scenario development—imagining the future of spatial justice in the EU. The interviewees were drawn from five project partner regions—Ireland (I), Wales (W), Scotland (S), Spain (Sp) and Poland (P) (Table 1). Interviews were conducted between October and December 2020. Interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min in duration. All interviews were conducted in English except for five of the Spanish respondents, who were interviewed in Spanish, using an interpreter who also transcribed and translated the interviews into English. The sample was chosen purposively, using contacts who were known to the IMAJINE project partners. The criteria for selection was that the interviewees should be actively involved in local development across any or more than one key sector (education, transport, housing, social care, health, disability, etc.) employed either with well-established NGOs at the national regional or local level, or within government at the national, regional or local level, and to be able to speak knowledgeably about their experiences from a policy as well as an applied (training, information, service delivery) focus. Each organisation relied on a range of income sources. This could include membership fees, donations, government contracts and/or grants and direct or indirect EU funds.

The interview findings were analysed using thematic analysis, with themes derived both from the conceptual framing and the interview findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These were organised

TABLE 1 Interviewee details.

Country	Sector	Remit	ID code
Scotland	Gender equality	National	S1
	Health and social care	National	S2
Poland	Cross-border regional development	Regional	P1
	Social challenges; civic participation through social innovation	Regional	P2
	Economic development; SME development	Regional	P3
	Social challenges; civic participation; local NGO support	Regional	P4
Spain	Association of mining municipalities	Regional	Sp1
	Regional and rural development	Regional	Sp2
	Regional and rural development; economic and local development	Regional	Sp3
	Regional Office—Ministry of Social Rights and Welfare	Regional	Sp4
	Health transport provider	Regional	Sp5
	Education to socially excluded groups	Local	Sp6
Wales	Economic and social development	Regional	W1
	Co-operative—housing advocacy expert	National	W2
Ireland	Rural development	Local	I1
	Rural advocacy	National	I2
	Housing Advocacy	National	I3
	Independent living for persons with disabilities	Local	I5

below under three main cross-cutting themes (Table 2) and a series of (sometimes overlapping) subthemes that are elaborated in the discussion below. Among the issues explored with interviewees were (a) their ideas on the meaning of spatial justice; (b) how spatial injustice manifested itself in their region or area; (c) whether greater levels of local autonomy would provide a means to alleviate spatial injustice and promote sustainable rural development; (d) the extent to which place-based contexts mattered to the experience of inequalities and to what constituted a good life in the rural; (e) the challenges of engaging with policymakers and decision-makers on these issues. Framed by the earlier conceptual discussion, these gave rise to three overarching themes: (a) constructing (rural) sustainability values; (b) a ‘successful’ rural and the right to a good life; (c) spatial justice framings of rural sustainability. These were each interconnected through references to the nature of power, justice and fairness in decisions on the sustainability of the rural; reflections on whose values mattered to this process and how they could be advanced; and on how acknowledging place-based knowledge along with place-based aspirations and concerns were inherent to successfully setting and achieving rural sustainability goals and contesting framings of a ‘deserving’ rural. These issues were reflected in the subthemes that illustrated in various ways the nature of these perceptions and experiences. Additional issues that did not emerge as strongly from the interviews related to the potential impact of governments’ failure to be more communicative with citizens on top-down sustainability policies and strategies or the kinds of arrangements that would ensure attention to more fine-grained local differences in setting fair sustainable rural development strategies—how spatial justice could be further advanced. None of the interviewees was familiar with the term ‘spatial justice’, but on explanation, identified quickly with it in terms of their work and development experiences.

TABLE 2 Thematic structure of main interview findings.

THEME: Constructing (rural) sustainability values	THEME: A 'successful' rural and the right to a rural good life	THEME: Spatial justice framings of rural sustainability
Alternative values of rural sustainability/alternative expectations/perceptions of a good life	Perceptions of a good life/the right to a good life	Inadequate economic models
Governing (rural) sustainability	Governing (rural) sustainability	Inadequate time frames
Institutional resistance/inertia/flippancy culture of conformity/regressiveness/neglect.	Measures of inequality/accounting for inequality	Limited vision
Local insights	Place-based circumstances	Political cynicism/opportunism
Social innovation	Legacy issues	Political risk-aversion to local planning autonomy
	Possible transformation	Sustainability 'quick fixes'
	Diversity (including the potential for innovation)	Sustainability without a spatial justice values base
Relevance of territorial cohesion and social solidarity as concepts	Service provision	Notions of 'deservingness'/struggles for local legitimization
	Capacity gap	Respecting communities
	How local economies work	Rural exclusion
	Data needs	Sustainability 'lockout'
	Perceptions of a successful rural	Rural advocacy
		Rural penalty
		Rural representation

NEGOTIATING RURAL SUSTAINABILITY AND SPATIAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE

Constructing rural sustainability values

This theme of constructing rural sustainability values emerged from discussion in interviews around the evolution of perceptions of social and spatial equality in rural regions and the potential for negotiating or contesting such values in power-laded governance contexts.

Rural sustainability values were articulated through the everyday place-based experiences of respondents recounted through their own or their relevant communities' efforts to achieve a reasonable quality of life in that place. This was linked as much to achieving social equity as to ensuring economic growth; for example, through a stated need for places to secure fairer and

more locally relevant access to public services, infrastructure and facilities, with communities being able to negotiate about what constituted the opportunities and threats to its future sustainability, with sustainability seen as a holistic kind of wellbeing. Values of justice, equity and fairness in resource distribution and accessibility underpinned this notion of sustainability but were noted to have changed following the 2008 economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic:

I think that people have evolved quite a lot lately with regard to the concept of welfare since the economic crisis has taken a lot of purchasing power away from many people, and that has changed the focus on the idea of welfare. I think that maybe 15 years ago, before the crisis hit us, there was a concept of welfare that was much more associated with income, but now it's moving to concepts such as access to public services. Above all, after the pandemic, I think we're seeing that access to health is a very important issue, also access to services such as local commerce, and of course access to transport. As there is no job stability there are many people who have to go from one place to another; not being able to access cheap public transport is giving them a lot of problems. (Sp6)

This notion of social and spatial equity was also invoked as a distributive guide for public policy decisions on granting public subsidies to investment projects. It was argued by another Spanish respondent that the existing guiding criterion—to maintain employment—was insufficient to respond to changing values about rural development needs, values that were being shaped by context-specific knowledge and experiences of enduring social and spatial disadvantage. Rather, it was contended that place-based criteria such as the capacity to take advantage of endogenous resources and having necessary levels of infrastructure to enable these places to overcome existing and growing geographical polarisation were more important. In other words, enabling locations to even take part in what continued to be market-led forms of development. Here, the values informing notions of social and spatial equity relate not necessarily to a 'levelling out' of opportunities but more to a relational perception of places as having been essentially left behind or '*forgotten*' (Sp1), compared to others and a desire to at least achieve the capacity to reach and then plan to move forward from some acceptable starting point. Values thus also reflected certain expectations about acceptable levels of care and concern by the state and other institutional actors or at least an acknowledgement that they would support rural communities' own innovative methods to achieve sustainability.

However, there can be significant institutional inertia or resistance in recognising and acknowledging sustainability challenges, in endorsing the importance of local insights and in supporting innovation. One interviewee in Ireland gave the example of healthcare policies that are premised on assumptions that rural residents would travel to use services, rather than services going to the residents, and that the rural population was fully informed about the services available. The respondent saw this as a failure by central bodies to recognise the complexity of local rural circumstances or to consult with them on what would work best:

...there is a huge gap between the level of awareness professionals [health administration] think is out there around their services, and the actual awareness—it's so far apart. A lot of people don't know what their rights are. If you don't understand your own rights, then how can you demand better treatment and better advocate for yourself? (I1)

In this case, institutional inertia had been countered by bottom-up innovation by the respondent mobilising their own network of contacts to obtain public health information for individuals that they encountered in rural development activities. However, there are limits to the scope of individual action, and initiatives by rural stakeholders promoting innovative measures reflecting values of social and spatial value were reportedly met with a lack of understanding on the part of government officials.

One example of this concerned a lack of access to affordable housing in rural communities in Wales, leading to out-migration, the interviewee noting that *'One of the things that's driving people out is that they don't see any future in a village or a community where they can't afford to buy a property'* (W3). The interviewee had worked with a housing advocacy group to develop cooperative and community-led housing as a response but found that many regional government officers did not understand the concept:

They are geared up to understand housing associations, registered social landlords, local authorities providing housing. But they're not geared up to understand that communities do it themselves. So, we often find that existing legislation has not been set up to understand community-led housing. (W3)

Consequently, community-led housing had been omitted from legislation in Wales on energy efficiency, landlord accreditation and planning reform, limiting the capacity for local practitioners to use these instruments in tackling the rural housing problem. This was despite other aspects of Welsh Government policy discourse supporting community-led housing, with top-down structures restricting thinking across policy silos. Similar observations were made about top-down restrictions on regional rural development in Spain, especially as they had come to impact programmes like LEADER, originally underpinned by an ideology of bottom-up development initiative. The LEADER programme had originally been devised to build on more locally defined place-based ideas of success; however, the interviewee felt that the element of self-determination through local decision-making or scope for project innovation had been gradually lost within centralised rural development policy frameworks: *'...especially now, as we are involved in the regional Rural Development Programme, we have a structure behind the Autonomous Community and the Ministry which is very rigid when it comes to programming and implementing actions. There is no concept of a pilot and demonstration project, which was very important in the rural environment'* (Sp2) (cf. Navarro et al., 2016).

The public administration is very rigid and has criteria that often do not fit with a programme like this...And then the administration in general applies the policy of 'when in doubt—"no"'. In other words, you often propose something and, if in doubt, they refuse. (Sp4)

The perception here was of a risk-averse public administration that placed limited trust in communities and even exhibited a certain lack of respect for their capacities to imagine and implement measures relevant to and supportive of quality-of-life initiatives.

Indeed, the problem for rural communities, according to a Spanish regional ministry official, is not that there is limited awareness by the government of how values of justice and fairness matter

to rural sustainability but relates rather to government's inability to think beyond or escape the market-led logic of most policy decisions:

The municipalities and local administrations have very little room to manoeuvre. They cannot do much to improve the situation. Here, what has long been asked of both the regional and national government is that different policies be applied in rural and depopulated areas: tax benefits, incentives for business start-ups, incentives for public workers, for example, qualified doctors who do not want to come to these areas. But I think everyone is aware of this, but the policies are still implemented without making exceptions, without taking this into account. (Sp3)

Inflexibility and misconceptions in the framing of policy instruments can also lead to omissions in consultation and data-gathering and thus injustices in the design of programmes, even where policies discursively incorporate values of equity and redistribution. In another example from Wales, a participant described how consultation with rural communities over the implementation of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (see Jones et al., 2020) had been distorted because the community councillors engaged tended to be drawn from older and wealthier demographic groups and had generally not themselves consulted with 'hard-to-reach' community members. As they observed, *'it skews that data; so you never really see a true picture of what the village looks like and what the problems might be'* (W2).

Highlighting the importance of diverse and changing values about rural sustainability, this theme interconnects with and complements the second and third themes in terms of illustrating how and why discourses of rural sustainability are so framed, in what ways and by whom; how more locally constructed values and concerns could become part of informing what constitutes a successful rural that also represents a good life; and how they inform spatially just perspectives on sustainable rural development. It also highlights the difficulties and challenges of pursuing spatial justice goals for those organisations that must appeal to levels of government, for example, where policy that drives the goals of these organisations is made. While it is difficult to make direct comparisons across the different geographical areas that each interviewee's organisation represented due to their different scales of operation (i.e. local, regional or national) and locational base, each one was strongly aware of the relative development challenges of rurality in terms of its spatial and political peripherality, and how these challenges manifested in spatial justice terms. The interviews highlight the difficulties and challenges of pursuing rural sustainability goals for their respective constituents that must appeal to levels of government, for example, where policy that drives the goals of these organisations is made.

A 'successful' rural and the right to a rural good life

This theme pertains to tensions around what represents 'success' in rural sustainability terms, and how it rhymes with experiences of spatial justice that also constituted achievement of a 'good life' in the rural. Respondents referred to the impact of place-based circumstances—the specifics of place that shaped ideas and experiences of success. These notions of success were believed to be frequently driven by top-down (including regional) politically motivated considerations, often dealing with the legacy of previous public policies or investment and/or reflecting wider globalization trends—all of which had directed how local economies worked. Polish interviewees talked about success in terms of perceptions of economic progress in some localities or regions relative to

others, represented as an urban–rural, core–periphery divide. One, whose organisation delivered projects and training supporting social innovation and civil participation, spoke about the need to first create the conditions under which success could be appropriately defined and then achieved. For him, having a vision for success and then achieving it first required a fair set of opportunities to access and draw down development funding from regional, national and EU sources: *‘It [spatial justice] doesn’t only involve spatial differences in the distribution of resources, it’s also about the rules governing the possibilities to use these resources, to access these resources’* (P2).

For another Polish participant, involved in cross-border development, success had become strongly associated with regions having larger cities and a critical mass of experts who could access and draw down significant funding:

So even though it is an option for them [lagging regions], yet they can’t compare with the amount of funds that the other regions are getting; and this gap is growing bigger; in Gdansk, everywhere you go, you can see the results of EU money coming in and no one can say that you cannot. But if you go to the outskirts of the region, there is a huge difference. Because even though they have the same chances, they cannot get the money. They don’t usually have experts. People who live there, they go for work or to study to different regions or even abroad and they never come back. So, the brain drain is visible; it’s like this vicious cycle; and they do not know how to break this cycle. (P1)

Success in this case was perceived through comparison with relatively more prosperous regions in terms of economic growth—as a competitiveness issue but with unequal starting points in terms of provision of services like public transport, education or health care. Overcoming some of these problems was being achieved through a number of cross-border initiatives with regions that identified with one another based on the same kinds of peripherality constraints, with co-operation among cross-border regional authorities regarded as often proving more effective than with national governments.

The specific impact of legacy issues and ongoing lack of strategy relating to previous or planned public investment or other policy decisions pertaining to rural or peripheral areas was identified as another challenge to conceptualising success and to establishing rights to claim improved circumstances and conditions relative to other places. The Asturias region of Spain, a mainly rural area but also a former mining region, was identified in this regard. Funding initiatives dating from the mid-1990s up to the present day to help the region recover from the closure of mines were described as top-down, politically motivated and bestowing few enduring advantages on the region or its communities:

There was no lack of public resources or funds to undertake this development, but actually the contrary. For 20 years, we have had specific state aid for the creation of infrastructure and business projects in the mining areas. There were no strategic plans, which meant that all investment had a place in our municipalities. In other words, everything was financed for everyone, without a clear strategy of what each territory needed. (Sp1)

Excessive bureaucracy, unworkable regulations and lack of local capacity to take advantage of these investments were also cited as obstacles to asserting more locally defined ideas of rural success as the right to achieve a good life. Further examples from the same region related to the

attitude of public service providers in failing to exhibit a moral sense of the public good for rural places and populations:

There is little flexibility in terms of services in the rural environment. In a town like the one I live in, there is a high school that has two or three training modules—administrative, car painting and so on—but they have been teaching the same module for 20 or 30 years, generation after generation. So, there is very little chance that those people who are trained will have a job. It is not every year that there are 15 jobs for people who can paint cars, or for clerks. (Sp2)

Accessing rights to a good life in the rural can also be thought about in terms of success in rural encounters, the idea that these would define a ‘successful’ rural. Some respondents reflected on the distortion of rights when applied as if all places were homogeneous. One such example related to the rights of persons with disabilities in the rural as outlined by an independent living official who described the scarcity of accessible training opportunities for this group in the rural: *‘Sometimes disability services are looking to position people into programmes and they’re not suitable but they don’t want to know about that; it’s a tick box [exercise]’* (I5). Much of this limited access to rural service provision was exacerbated by lack of broadband to deliver online programme options or accessible and affordable public transport to access larger training centres.

This marketization of care and its impacts in rural contexts was also highlighted by a Scottish health and social care advocacy representative who similarly referred to the inability of service users, particularly those with chronic illness or disability who were availing of so-called self-directed support schemes, to either find necessary services in their area or influence decision-making about how and where they were delivered: *‘We have heard from people living in rural areas being told by social work professionals that if they wanted access to something, they would need to move to a bigger area’* (S2).

In other respects, the Scottish Government was perceived to be making efforts towards co-production of public strategies and mainstreaming of rights-based approaches to identifying and delivering quality-of-life measures for citizens, with initiatives such as the National Performance Framework, which is directly linked to the sustainable development goals. However, the same participant noted that challenges with evidence collection and implementation remained, especially at the local level where data were not being robustly gathered and where transparency and public participation in decision-making remained largely unaddressed: *‘The rhetoric on equality and rights is pretty good but there’s no accountability’* (S2).

This theme reveals the contradictions often inherent in institutional versus more everyday experiences and understandings of a ‘successful’ rural; it is also one that illustrates conflicts about economic prosperity as a principal measure of a ‘good life’.

Spatial justice framings of rural sustainability

The theme of spatial justice framings relates to the ways that discourses of spatial justice become established and employed; how they reflect respondents’ and other actors’ underlying perceptions, assumptions and claims regarding what are just and fair approaches to rural sustainability for places and communities to experience; how they become applied through various processes and practices; how unjust practices and outcomes are recognised, and whether and how they are resisted. A key aspect of this, articulated in several of the interviews, was the notion of a ‘rural

penalty' that rural regions are disadvantaged by political and market framings of the rural as a site of limited growth potential due to structural conditions of low population density, unreliable digital connectivity and limited access to labour. Some interviewees further connected the rural penalty to a prevailing discourse of the rural having to 'make do' with the support made available to it, related in turn to ideas of 'deservingness' and worth. Regions that were framed as persistently lagging economically, it was suggested, were regarded as less deserving of assistance as there was little confidence of 'success' being achieved.

This approach was also linked to political cynicism and an observed lack of respect for rural communities on the part of decision-makers: *'We are few, we represent few votes and we count for little; I think that sums it up. And of course, it is much easier to make the same policies for everyone than to make different ones. Making different policies requires a much greater effort'* (Sp3). What could be described as sustainability quick fixes for the rural, not founded on a spatial justice values base, also risk reinforcing perceptions of the rural as having less legitimate claims for support within mainstream sustainability discourses because of a record of poor (empirically measured) sustainability outcomes. In Spain's mining region, for example, *'Most of the projects financed by these state mining funds lacked feasibility studies, responded more to short-term political needs than to meet the needs of the population and alternative development of the municipalities; there was a poor prioritization of needs, and projects that were not strategic to the territories were financed'* (Sp1). Feedback on sustainability project outcomes was described as *'always being top-down, never bottom-up'...* 'tokenistic' 'self-validating and circular' (I1).

A participant in Wales referred to the challenge of confronting established policy and governance approaches to aspects of rural sustainability when it came to housing development in the rural, whilst another commented that:

The rural areas definitely feel like policy is driven by the urban centres. And so many of the policies that they've [government/local authorities] created around planning, for example, are more suited to urban areas, controlling urban sprawl, or being sensitive to all those kinds of urban issues. They're not necessarily as relevant in rural areas where, for example, the impact of a community group building a small group of houses in a village might be very much welcome by the local community. (W1)

Here, the framing of sustainability in spatial planning that emphasised environmental protection over social justice or economic sufficiency could also result in spatially unjust outcomes when applied as a one-size-fits-all-places policy. Challenging these framings was hampered by local communities' perceptions that they did not have the power to lobby for change: *'Most people don't even vote in local elections, you know, for local county councillors, so they don't really understand the impact of not voting in local elections. So there is a lot of work around getting people engaged in local politics, getting them to lobby around planning'* (W1). This low level of engagement was also linked to an observed lack of local capacity to leverage existing mechanisms (political and/or funding) to achieve sustainability or to advance alternative options aimed at aligning necessary resources with specific local needs. Capacity included the required expertise and experience to identify and articulate local needs against existing market-led as opposed to values-led criteria, to apply in a competitive arena for sources of funding, to be competent in English in the case of EU funds and to deliver on measurable, time-delineated development goals.

At the regional level, P1 described the success in connecting sustainability and development concerns because of the co-operation achieved by the group of mainly rural regions she represented, working under a shared development agenda funded by an EU cross-border initiative to

promote joint projects and horizontal networks (according to Agyeman et al. (2002), the layer that can draw attention to issues of injustice). While the group of regions continued to experience significant development disparities, compared to more economically developed EU regions, specific narratives for successful rural development strategies could be framed by them using the power and influence of the interregional networks, and policy changes favoured by all the regions could be proposed directly at EU level, with the group's secretariat connecting bottom-up and top-down discourses. At more local levels, access to such networks was most likely to be through involvement in projects managed at this regional level. At both levels, the exercise of values of fairness and justice over and above those of deservingness or entitlements was seen to be curtailed by insufficient local level data to make alternative cases for sustainability in development, and '*a paternalistic pattern of development aid or central planning*' rather than an approach that supported '*autonomy, cooperation, trust and empowerment*' (P2). These contentions about the importance of local and place-specific approaches to development, the problem of territorially blind mainstream programmes and failure to intentionally and strategically decentralise to create platforms for inclusion and cooperation between local and other levels of development action are not new and have recently been explored through a series of European-funded projects (COHSMO, 2021; ESPON-PROFECY, 2017; RELOCAL, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This article has used insights from spatial justice to examine the notion of rural sustainability as a set of development goals that reflect just and equitable outcomes and that promote inclusive and participatory approaches to its development. It has focused on a values-based approach to understand sustainability to best reflect how sustainability goals are identified and prioritised by society and to account for the place-based, collective contexts from which they are derived and in which they are implemented. Viewed through a spatial justice lens, the achievement of rural sustainability means taking account of its multiple dimensions that are set by the specificities of places, and the relative perceptions of fair or just outcomes that also reflect the relational values of the communities involved. It draws attention to how rights and entitlements to different kinds of redistributive justice are rationalised and negotiated between citizens and policymakers.

In terms of the inclusive focus of spatial justice, the evidence from this research illustrates an evolving local-level emphasis on rural sustainability as a phenomenon that does not preclude but also does not revolve around economic growth. It is instead as much about achieving social equity, which at different times may mean different things. For example, in a period of austerity, it has been more about perceived fairness in accessing vital public services in a particular place and less about a traditional government focus on income or employment, which also tends to reflect more individualistic, instrumental values (Kenter et al., 2015; Raymond et al., 2019). Adequate access to public services and infrastructure and systems of governance is seen as supporting and enhancing local capacity and providing a level of freedom to adapt to changed circumstances, to control to a certain extent the impacts of rural change and to take advantage of opportunities to innovate with alternative sustainable development strategies—to be sufficiently empowered to take part in development. Without these conditions, there is an experience of exclusion from decision-making and barriers to legitimise social and relational values into alternative readings of sustainability, which could in turn inform and enhance rural sustainability policy and practice. Reaching consensus on the sustainability goals that matter most to local places and communities is thus best achieved through building on the latter's social and relational values that reflect in turn

the socially constructed ideas about distributive justice belonging to those places and communities (Rawls, 1971; Daniels, 1996; Miller, 1999). At national and regional levels, institutional inertia and reluctance to overcome in pragmatic ways the limits of market-led policy strategies for rural sustainability came through as a significant challenge to capitalising on local place-based sustainability visions; visions such as those articulated by Welsh respondents on forms of community-led housing development, Spanish respondents on local economic development and Irish and Scottish respondents on health-related service developments. Local municipal governments, a key partner in local sustainability agenda-setting, were regarded as having very little decision-making autonomy to effect positive change.

Spatial justice in rural sustainability also emphasises an inclusive focus, going beyond centrally set ideas or discourses of economic success. Illustrating success in rural sustainability in ways that also reflected spatially just outcomes and realisation of a 'good life' in the rural was associated with a need to contest top-down, urban-centric and growth-driven notions of success whereby the rural would always tend to underperform. It was also linked to a need to resist the imposition of policies and regulations that treated rural places and communities as homogeneous entities (assuming similar needs but also similar capacities to compete), often resulting in heightening dependencies and eroding development capacities (Dikeç, 2001; Nordberg, 2020; Storper, 2011). Illustrating successful forms of rural sustainability, whether or not these ran counter to the dominant growth-led measures (Demeterova et al., 2020) meant having the power at the regional and local levels to first advance definitions of success that were socially and spatially relevant and achievable and equitable in outcome. These definitions and their successful application and follow-through were in turn felt to be conditional on having available, relevant local-level data to inform the sustainability debate, on being able to take account of the legacies of past development agendas, and on having fair access to needed resources.

As a concept that takes a relational approach to spatial analysis and policymaking, spatial justice focuses on relationships across and within space rather than identifying with specific spatial categories or boundaries (Walsh et al., 2021). The task of linking spatial justice discourses to those of rural sustainability was seen to be as much about challenging pre-existing dominant framings of the rural as undeserving, dependent and problematic as it was about finding ways to devise and propose new framings or to reclaim others that had come to be altered through competing values about distributive justice. Top-down politically motivated agendas and difficulties in accessing those governance arenas in which development decisions were made remained as key obstacles to challenging how place-specific rural sustainability goals should be identified and existing perspectives disrupted and resisted. Only in the case of the EU-funded cross-border interregional rural regional initiative discussed by P1 was there a clear indication that the group in question had the power and capacity to present their own ideas on development, strengthened by the common cause shared by all the partners in the network, where the group's secretariat had the skills and capacity to link the different bottom-up and top-down discourses. According to Agyeman et al. (2002), it is at this level of horizontal networking where attention to issues of injustice can be drawn.

The relative lack of specific reference throughout the interviews to values pertaining to environmental sustainability possibly relates in part to the respondents' areas of expertise, which tended more towards social and economic issues. The research was also conducted in the context of austerity where social and economic aspects of sustainability were possibly regarded as more pressing than environmental aspects. One exception was the comments by W2 who considered that an initiative like co-operative housing was intrinsically about a higher regard for environmental sustainability. Another was P3, who considered that the environment had become a much

more prominent issue now in rural sustainability, which included the quality of air and drinking water, but also green energy, and supportive public infrastructure such as public transport. In the case of former mining areas in Spain, the urgency in sustainability terms was on preventing social decline due to out-migration and securing more place-relevant forms of economic development in locations that had already been environmentally damaged. The impacts of trends like increased holiday home or second home development in Wales and Spain were discussed in terms of social and economic sustainability, more than environmental. Such emphases potentially also reflect the dominant reactions to existing top-down discourses of rural sustainability as economic sustainability, where more robust framing of environmental sustainability concerns as those of rural spatial justice has still to emerge.

One of the recurring themes in this research was this effort on the part of respondents, all of whom represented different national, regional or local organisations and groups, to find more accessible and robust mediums through which locally held, place-relevant values of justice, fairness and equity could be advocated for and legitimated as part of rural sustainability debates, and where other related outcomes such as enhanced social solidarity could be promoted. It flags the important role of academics and other experts to promote concepts like spatial justice that inform and expand discourses on sustainability (including territorial cohesion), to introduce them at more mainstream discussions at the national and EU levels and to sustain critiques of sustainability.

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Data are available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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