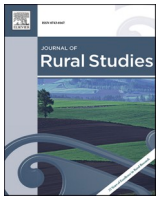
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Reclassifying the rural: A critical review of European rural typologies through a socio-relational and justice lens

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ABSTRACT

Rural territories have moved to the centre of European policy agendas, tasked with supporting ecological, digital, demographic, and energy transitions. Yet the classificatory frameworks used to define and differentiate rural areas remain largely anchored in structural-functional logics centred on density, settlement morphology, and relations with urban systems. This paper critically reinterprets European rural typologies through a relational and spatial justice lens. Drawing on two major EU project reviews and widely used European and national classification systems, it organises dominant classification logics into a comparative matrix and examines their underlying assumptions, policy functions, and analytical limits. By bringing Woods' global countryside together with Bourdieusian relational theory, Wacquant's account of territorial stigmatisation, Ripoll's work on institutionalised spatial categories, and spatial justice scholarship, the paper argues that rural typologies operate as instruments of territorial ordering. They can shape visibility, legitimacy, eligibility, and intervention, and may stabilise urban-referential imaginaries while obscuring relational positioning, symbolic recognition, and institutional capacity. The paper calls for more reflexive classification practices that make their assumptions explicit and account for the justice implications of typological design. In an era of stacked transitions, reclassifying the rural becomes a critical governance challenge.

1. Introduction

Rural Europe is moving from the margins of policy discourse to its centre. Under the European Green Deal and the digital agenda, rural territories are expected to support ecological, digital, demographic, and energy transitions: hosting renewable energy infrastructures, safeguarding biodiversity, stabilising food systems, responding to ageing populations, and accommodating new forms of remote and hybrid work (European Commission, 2021, 2024). Rural regions are therefore no longer framed only as sites of agricultural production or demographic shrinkage. They are increasingly positioned as strategic terrains for managing wider socio-ecological transformation.

Yet while these expectations have expanded, many of the classificatory tools used to understand and govern rural space remain anchored in older spatial logics. Dominant rural definitions continue to rely on population density thresholds, settlement morphology, and functional proximity to urban labour markets (European Commission: Eurostat, 2021; OECD, 2019; ESPON, 2011). These instruments were developed to enable statistical harmonisation, territorial comparison, and policy targeting across heterogeneous regions. Their value is clear: without shared categories, it is difficult to monitor territorial change or coordinate intervention across Member States. The problem is that these categories often define rurality through low density, greater distance, or weaker integration into urban systems. Rural space then becomes legible mainly through what it lacks in relation to the urban, rather than through its own differentiated socio-spatial trajectories. This reflects an urbanormative tendency in which metropolitan conditions become the implicit benchmark of spatial development, while rural difference is framed through distance, deficit, or deviation from those standards (Fulkerson and Thomas, 2014, 2019; Seale and Fulkerson, 2014).

Rural studies have long questioned whether "the rural" can be defined through stable territorial attributes, fixed settlement forms, or a residual opposition to the urban. In responses, several scholars have proposed layered architectures of rural space (Halfacree, 2006), network-based views or rural economies (Murdoch, 2000), and relational processes as a basis for understanding both rural actors, meanings and practices (Heley and Jones, 2012). The classificatory problem examined in this paper therefore belongs to a wider theoretical debate

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about how rurality is made knowable, comparable, and governable.

This debate has become sharper under contemporary convergent transitions, where demographic restructuring, labour market changes, digital connectivity, climate policy, agrifood transitions, and energy infrastructures are unfolding at once. Rural territories are not passive backdrops to these processes. They are actively reworked through global commodity chains, migrant labour systems, amenity migration, conservation governance, financialised land markets, and infrastructural expansion. Woods conceptualises this condition as the "global countryside," arguing that rural places are hybrid assemblages shaped through relations of exteriority rather than bounded containers of tradition or decline (Woods, 2007, 2016), an argument that now extends to the centrality of rural areas in planetary crises (Wang et al., 2023). This matters for rural classifications because similar rural morphologies can conceal very different territorial positions. A wind-energy region, a depopulating agricultural plain, and a gentrifying amenity landscape may share low density or comparable land-cover patterns, while occupying distinct positions within circuits of capital, regulation, labour, and governance.

Current typologies often struggle to capture this complexity. They tend to measure stocks, such as density, land use, employment structure, demographic change, and service access, together with selected functional relations such as commuting or travel time. These variables are useful, but they can under-specify the external relations, symbolic framings, and institutional capacities that shape rural societies and the trajectories available to them. This limitation has consequences for rural governance, because classifications do not only organise data; they also influence how territories are perceived by institutions, investors, policy actors, and residents. They can shape which places are seen as dynamic or dependent, which claims appear credible, and which forms of disadvantage become policy-relevant.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, classification is an exercise of symbolic power because it structures what is visible, legitimate, and actionable (Bourdieu, 1989). Categories such as "peripheral," "lagging," "remote," or "accessible" do not simply describe territories. Once embedded in policy narratives, funding rules, investment decisions, and administrative routines, they can shape territorial reputation, expectations, and intervention pathways. Wacquant's work on territorial stigmatisation shows how place-based labels can sediment into institutional responses and affect the standing of territories within wider fields of power (Wacquant, 2007, 2023). Ripoll's work on spatial capital further helps to understand why territorial position is not only a spatial attribute but a socially mediated capacity to access, mobilise, and benefit from resources across space (Ripoll, 2019).

These insights connect rural typology debates to work on left-behind places, peripheralisation, and rural regional development. Recent regional studies scholarship shows that spatial inequality is not simply a matter of local economic weakness, but is produced through broader processes of infrastructural disconnection, dependence on centres of decision-making, state retrenchment, and discursive marginalisation (MacKinnon et al., 2024). Rodríguez-Pose and colleagues similarly link long-term territorial decline, interterritorial inequality, and political discontent to the perception that some places "do not matter" within contemporary economic and political systems (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Welsh and Heley's account of rural regionalism further shows how rural regions may be fitted into city-regional governance imaginaries that do not adequately reflect their own histories, institutions, or development logics (Welsh and Heley, 2023). These debates are important for rural classification because typologies can participate in the wider governance of territorial disadvantage, but they may also stabilise categories of remoteness, laggingness, or dependency when used without reflexive attention to relational position and institutional capacity.

Spatial justice theory sharpens this critique by foregrounding the normative effects of territorial ordering. Justice concerns redistribution, recognition, and representation (Young, 1990; Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010). When rural territories are homogenised through binary urban-rural codes, coarse administrative units, or urban proximity criteria, differentiated vulnerabilities can remain statistically invisible. Threshold effects, underbounding, and urban-centred eligibility rules may translate epistemic simplifications into material consequences, shaping where resources flow and whose claims are acknowledged (National Academies of SciencesEngineeringand Medicine, 2016). Classification practices therefore sit at the intersection of knowledge production and distributive politics.

The problem with current rural classification is therefore threefold. Empirically, dominant typological frameworks can flatten rural heterogeneity by treating territories with similar spatial attributes as comparable, even when their economic exposures, institutional capacities, and development trajectories differ. Conceptually, they often remain tied to structural-functional and urban-bound imaginaries that struggle to accommodate the relational complexity described in contemporary rural theory. Instrumentally, they can inform policy through simplified categories that misrecognise local needs, overlook institutional capacity, or reinforce development traps in already marginalised regions.

In response, this paper reinterprets existing European rural typologies as instruments of symbolic and spatial ordering. It draws on relational rural studies, including work on rural networks, rural space, the global countryside, and planetary rural geographies (Murdoch, 2000; Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2007, 2016; Heley and Jones, 2012; Wang et al., 2023), relational sociologies of social and symbolic space (Bourdieu, 1984, 1989; Wacquant, 2007, 2023; Ripoll, 2019), and spatial justice scholarship (Young, 1990; Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010). The aim is to examine how classification organises visibility, legitimacy, eligibility, and policy intervention.

The study builds on recent reviews of European rural typologies (Féret et al., 2020; Stjernberg et al., 2023) but takes a different analytical direction. It does not expand the catalogue of typologies but offers a theory-guided critical synthesis of dominant classification logics to illustrate how different logics make different aspects of rurality legible, and how they foreground or obscure relational and justice-relevant dimensions. Four questions guide the analysis: (1) What relations are privileged when typologies classify rural territories, and what relations are rendered invisible? (2) How do typological categories shape territorial legitimacy, stigma, and institutional positioning? (3) What distributive and recognitional risks emerge when classifications are linked to funding, services, and policy targeting? (4) Who participates in producing the categories, indicators, and thresholds through which territories become officially rural?

Methodologically, the paper reviews both rural-specific typologies and broader territorial classifications that materially shape how rurality is delineated, differentiated, and governed. This is necessary because many influential frameworks are not exclusively rural typologies but wider territorial classification systems in which rural categories appear as segments of an urban-rural continuum. The analysis therefore distinguishes between two layers: delimitation logics, which define how rural areas are carved out of the territory, and differentiation logics, which typify diversity once spatial units have been defined. This distinction allows the paper to maintain a rural focus while acknowledging the broader governance architectures that produce rural categories.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework, linking relational rural studies with relational spatial theory and spatial justice. Section 3 explains the theory-guided narrative review and the comparative matrix. Section 4 reviews key classification logics, including morphological, functional, structural, administrative, demographic, locational, landscape-based, scenario-based, and hybrid approaches. Section 5 synthesises the findings and discusses the epistemic limits and political stakes of contemporary rural classifications.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Typologies as instruments of territorial ordering

Typologies are classificatory devices that make spatial heterogeneity readable for governance. In European planning and policy practice, they standardise territorial descriptions across jurisdictions, support statistical harmonisation, and help operationalise eligibility and targeting within territorial cohesion and rural development agendas (OECD, 2019; European Commission: Eurostat, 2021). Their role is therefore descriptive and infrastructural: they provide the categories through which territories become comparable, monitorable, and actionable within administrative systems. As James C. Scott argues, modern governance depends on "state simplifications", such as maps, censuses, registers, and standard units, that translate complex lived realities into formats that can be summarised, compared, and aggregated. For officials to understand and act upon complex social and spatial arrangements, "that complex reality must be reduced to schematic categories" (Scott, 1998, p. 77). This synoptic view allows states and large organisations to detect patterns, coordinate interventions, and evaluate policies through standard indicators (Scott, 1998). Yet this same process necessarily selects which territorial characteristics matter, and which are left aside, because standardisation requires differences to be compressed into categories that can travel across cases (Scott, 1998).

Seen in this way, classification carries a double edge: it creates institutional legibility, while it can also erase local knowledge and diversity (Scott, 1998). Typologies produce this effect through three basic choices: variables, units, and thresholds. Variable choice decides what is measured, for example density, accessibility, commuting, or land use. Unit choice decides the spatial container through which difference is read, for example grid cells, municipalities, LAU units, or NUTS regions. Threshold choice decides where one category ends, and another begins. Once these choices are embedded in reports, indicators, funding rules, and administrative procedures, they can become "operative facts" for institutions. They shape how policies are designed, how resources are allocated, and how territories are administratively seen (Scott, 1998).

Territorial typologies therefore embed implicit theories of space. They define what counts as meaningful difference and often privilege measurable proxies such as density, accessibility, or labour-market integration as authoritative descriptors. For instance, when rurality is defined primarily through low density or distance from urban centres, it becomes legible as residual or derivative, rather than as a category with its own internal logics, histories, and differentiated trajectories. The practical consequences are that rural complexity is flattened, differences between rural development paths become harder to recognise, and policy intervention can become poorly informed. Territories are then targeted through generic proxy-driven templates, rather than through categories that reflect context-specific needs, capacities, and relations.

This is why typologies need to be treated as political and technical devices. They do not simply organise information after the fact. They help produce the field of action in which rural territories are compared, prioritised, funded, and governed. Understanding this ordering role is the starting point for evaluating their limits in rural governance and policy design.

2.2. Relational rurality, symbolic power, and territorial positioning

The previous section established typologies as instruments that simplify territory for governance. Relational rural theory pushes this argument further by asking what is lost when rural territories are classified through static, place-bound categories and proposing alternatives. Halfacree's three-fold architecture of rural space is useful here because it understands rurality through the interaction of rural localities, representations of the rural, and everyday rural lives (Halfacree, 2006). Similarly, Murdoch's work on rural networks challenges the opposition between endogenous and exogenous development by showing how rural economies are shaped through vertical agro-food networks and horizontal networks of innovation, learning, and non-agricultural change (Murdoch, 2000). Heley and Jones later describe rural space as relational, multi-authored, and multi-faceted, constituted through local-global interconnections, material processes, discursive meanings, and place-specific practices (Heley and Jones, 2012). These debates show that the classificatory problem examined in this paper is not only administrative, but also epistemological.

Woods' account of the global countryside provides the main rural-theory anchor for this paper. Rural places are not bounded containers of tradition, decline, or local specificity. They are hybrid assemblages shaped through relations of exteriority: commodity chains, migrant labour systems, environmental regulation, tourism, amenity migration, energy infrastructures, financialised land markets, and global cultural imaginaries (Woods, 2007, 2016). More recent work on planetary rural geographies extends this argument by showing that rural places are central to planetary crises, conflicts, and possibilities of hope, especially through food, water, energy, biodiversity, extraction, climate adaptation, and more-than-human relations (Wang et al., 2023). As a result, territories that appear similar in density, land cover, or settlement form may occupy very different positions within wider systems of capital, labour, regulation, infrastructure, and governance.

Bourdieu's theory of social space adds a second layer to this relational reading. Territory is not a neutral surface on which social processes unfold; it is positioned within structured fields of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital shape spatial hierarchies: who can invest in a place, who has the resources to remain, who is pushed to leave, which places attract recognition and resources from policy actors or investors, and which are marked as less valuable within dominant development narratives. Classification is central here because it works as a form of symbolic power, imposing categories that shape perception and legitimise particular representations of social space (Bourdieu, 1989). In the context of rural typologies, this means that classificatory labels can make unequal territorial positions appear natural or self-evident within the decision-making arenas where these categories are used. This is particularly relevant to deficit framings of rurality, because categories built around lack, distance, decline, or weak integration can transform historically produced inequalities into apparently objective territorial properties.

Wacquant extends this Bourdieusian insight into the territorial domain. Spatial naming and labelling can become mechanisms of durable marginalisation when labels such as "peripheral," "deprived," "remote," or "lagging" attach themselves to places and travel through policy, media, and institutional practice (Wacquant, 2007, 2023). These labels do not automatically produce stigma or injustice, but they may contribute to deficit narratives when detached from their diagnostic purpose. Ripoll further clarifies that spatial position should not be treated as an autonomous geographic attribute, but as part of how different forms of capital are distributed, mobilised, and institutionalised across space (Ripoll, 2019). Indeed, territorial categories can gain material force when they are embedded in eligibility thresholds, monitoring systems, programme categories, and infrastructural decisions.

Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual grounding for reading rural typologies as instruments of territorial ordering. Relational rural studies explain why static and place-bound categories often misread rural change, while Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Ripoll explain how classificatory categories acquire symbolic and institutional power. Rural typologies therefore describe rural differences but also help define which rural relations become visible, legitimate, and actionable in governance.

2.3. Spatial justice: Distributive, recognitional, and representation

Spatial justice provides criteria for evaluating why the hierarchies structured by classification logics matter for rural societies. It is used here to assess the risks that emerge when territorial categories become

linked to funding, service provision, policy targeting, institutional narratives, or public recognition. Justice is therefore understood through three connected dimensions: redistribution, recognition, and representation (Young, 1990; Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010).

Redistribution concerns the material effects of classification. Territorial categories influence where public resources, infrastructure, services, and investment are directed, and under what conditions. When classifications are connected to eligibility rules or policy priorities, they become distributive filters. Threshold-based delimitation, for example density cut-offs, travel-time criteria, or service-access categories, can shift a territory across administrative boundaries with material consequences for funding, service provision, or strategic attention. The justice-related concern is the way technical cut-offs can produce unequal outcomes for regions when attached to policy instruments.

Recognition concerns how rural territories and populations are represented, valued, and made intelligible. Young's account of structural injustice is useful here because marginalisation, powerlessness, and cultural domination operate through institutionalised ways of seeing difference (Young, 1990). Honneth adds that misrecognition is not merely a symbolic problem; it can involve the denigration of ways of life and the denial of social esteem (Honneth, 1995). In rural typologies, misrecognition occurs when territories are reduced to deficit labels such as remoteness, decline, dependency, weak integration, or low productivity. Such categories may be analytically useful in specific contexts, but they become justice-relevant when they narrow the range of legitimate rural futures, obscure local capacities, or transform historically produced inequalities into apparently objective territorial properties. Cuervo's work on rural education makes this point clearly: rural disadvantage cannot be understood only through resource distribution, because it is also shaped by the cultural devaluation of rural knowledge, institutions, and ways of being (Cuervo, 2023).

Finally, representation concerns who has voice in defining the categories, indicators, thresholds, and territorial narratives through which rural areas become governable. Fraser's account of justice as redistribution, recognition, and representation links material inequality, symbolic status, and political voice (Fraser, 2009). Most rural typologies are produced by statistical agencies, expert consortia, planning authorities, or policy institutions with little to no consultation of rural dwellers. This may be necessary for comparability, but it can also exclude the knowledge of those who live with the consequences of classification. Procedural exclusion is especially relevant for groups whose everyday geographies are weakly represented in formal consultation and statistical systems, such as rural youth, seasonal and migrant workers, unpaid carers, low-income residents, dispersed service users, elderly residents without mobility, and communities in institutionally weak municipalities.

In summary, classifications help produce localized forms of injustice through spatial arrangements, boundaries, scales, distances, and institutional geographies. A typology may therefore be technically coherent while still raising justice concerns if it makes some needs visible and others invisible, privileges some territorial positions over others, or turns rural difference into a deficit category.

2.4. Analytical implications

The framework developed above operationalises the relational lens through three analytical anchors, which we conceptualise as positioning, symbolisation, and institutionalisation. These anchors will guide the review of rural typologies by asking how classifications position rural territories within wider relations, how they attach meanings to rural places, and how their categories become embedded in governance.

Positioning refers to how a typology locates rural territories within wider socio-spatial relations. It asks whether classifications capture rural connections to labour markets, commodity chains, service systems, infrastructure, migration, tourism, environmental regulation, energy transitions, and urban-rural interdependencies. This anchor draws on Murdoch's rural networks, Heley and Jones's relational rural, Woods' global countryside, and Wang, Maye and Woods' planetary rural geographies.

Symbolisation refers to how typologies name and value rural territories. It asks whether labels such as "remote," "lagging," "declining," or "weakly integrated" frame rural places through deficit, vulnerability, strategic potential, or relational position. This anchor draws on Bourdieu's account of classification as symbolic power, Wacquant's work on territorial stigmatisation, and Halfacree's understanding of rurality as partly produced through representations and everyday meanings.

Institutionalisation refers to how classification categories become embedded in policy instruments, eligibility rules, funding systems, monitoring frameworks, and planning decisions. It asks how rural typologies move from analytical description into governance practice. This anchor draws on Scott's work on state legibility and administrative simplification, Ripoll's work on spatial capital and the institutionalisation of spatial categories and Bourdieu and Wacquant's attention to how categories gain force when they are authorised, repeated, and institutionalised through policy and administrative routines.

The spatial justice lens then evaluates these classification logics through distribution, recognition, and representation. Distribution concerns resources and services, recognition concerns the value attached to rural places and ways of life, and representation concerns who has voice in defining categories, thresholds, and indicators. In the qualitative analytical profiles, representation is expressed through the procedural dimension, understood as participation and influence in category-making (Arnstein, 1969; Till, 2009). Fig. 1summarises the two-lens framework and guides the analysis of delimitation and differentiation approaches that follows.

3. Methodology

This study develops a theory-guided critical synthesis of rural and territorial classification frameworks used in European policy, planning, and research. A narrative review design is appropriate because the article compares heterogeneous sources, including policy reports, statistical frameworks, project deliverables, and academic typologies, in order to identify recurring classification logics and interpret their conceptual and governance implications (Baumeister and Leary, 1997).

The empirical corpus draws on two main review sources: Féret et al. (2020), which reviews rural definitions and operational frameworks in European policy, and the GRANULAR Typology Stjernberg et al. (2023), which maps a wide range of European rural typologies. These were read alongside influential European and national classification frameworks produced by organisations such as the OECD, Eurostat, ESPON/EDORA, INSEE, and ANCT. The reviewed sources include both rural-specific typologies and broader territorial classifications in which rurality appears as part of an urban-rural continuum.

The frameworks vary in scale, institutional purpose, and technical design. They are compared here through their classification logics, i.e. the principles through which they make rural territories visible, measurable, and actionable. The review distinguishes between two layers. The first is delimitation, meaning approaches that define which territories count as rural, usually through morphological or functional criteria. The second is differentiation, meaning approaches that distinguish between different types of rural territories after the territorial field has been defined.

Each typology family was entered into a comparative matrix organised around six fields: layer, approach type, core classification logic, typical examples, key contribution, and critical risk. The descriptive fields identify how each approach works, including the indicators, thresholds, spatial units, and territorial assumptions it uses. The analytical fields interpret how each approach contributes to governance and what it may obscure when read through the two-lens

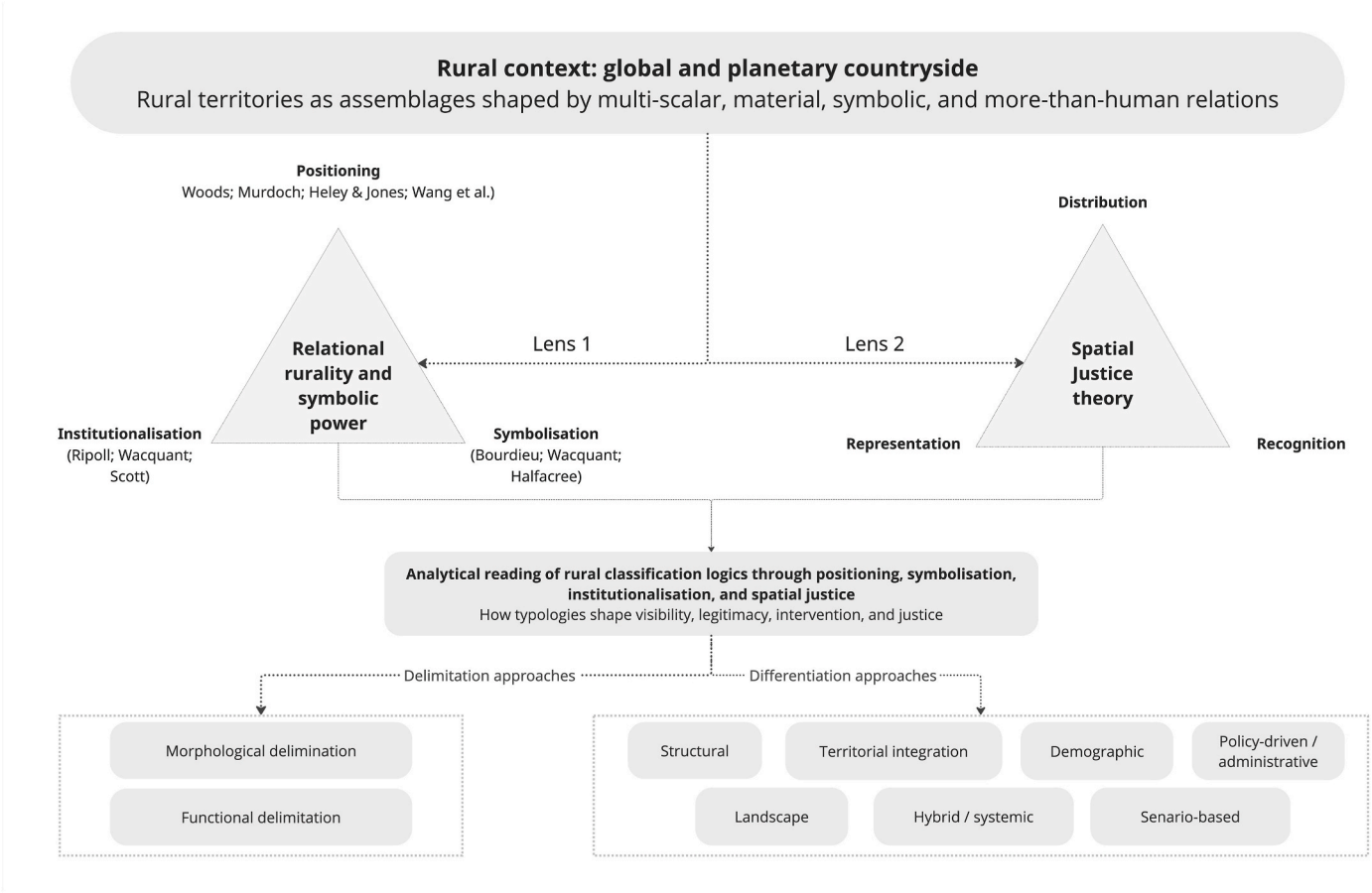


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework linking relational rural theory, symbolic power, and spatial justice to the analysis of rural typologies.
Source: the authors.

framework introduced in Section 2.

As discussed, the first lens uses the three relational perspectives of lens, operationalised through positioning, symbolisation, and institutionalisation. The second lens is the spatial justice lens, operationalised through distribution, recognition, and procedural.

The analysis is interpretive rather than evidentiary in a causal sense. It examines the classification logics through which rural territories are delimited, differentiated, named, and made administratively legible. For each typology family, the review identifies the main technical logic, its contribution to territorial analysis, and its potential relational and justice-relevant limitations. These limitations are treated as analytical risks, not as demonstrated policy outcomes. This distinction is important because classifications do not produce injustice on their own; they become consequential when connected to policy instruments, eligibility rules, funding systems, monitoring routines, and institutional narratives (Scott, 1998; Fraser, 2009).

To make the comparison transparent, each typology family is summarised through a qualitative analytical profile. The profiles use an ordinal three-level assessment, low, partial, and strong, across six dimensions: positioning, symbolisation, institutionalisation, distribution, recognition, and procedural. Low indicates that the dimension is weakly addressed. Partial indicates that it is present but indirect, limited, or conditional. Strong indicates that it is explicitly foregrounded in the classification logic or policy use. These profiles are heuristic summaries and should be read together with the narrative interpretation in each subsection and the synthesis in Table 1.

This method allows us to compare classification systems without treating them as technically equivalent. The aim is to examine how different classification logics make rurality legible, what they foreground or obscure, and how they may acquire relational, symbolic, institutional, and justice-relevant effects when connected to governance.

4. Review of typological approaches

European rural typologies differ in scale, purpose, and institutional setting, but they tend to rely on a limited number of recurring classification logics. Some approaches define the rural by drawing boundaries between rural and non-rural territories. Others differentiate between types of rural territories after the territorial field has already been defined. This section therefore distinguishes between delimitation and differentiation approaches.

Delimitation approaches identify which territories count as rural. They usually rely on morphological criteria, such as density and settlement form, or functional criteria, such as commuting flows and access to urban centres. Differentiation approaches classify diversity within rural territories. They may emphasise economic structure, demographic trajectory, territorial integration, landscape character, administrative status, scenario pathways, or hybrid combinations of indicators.

The section proceeds in two parts. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 examine delimitation approaches: morphological and functional classifications. Sections 4.3 to 4.9 examine differentiation approaches: structural, territorial integration, demographic, policy-driven and administrative, landscape, scenario-based, and hybrid/systemic classifications.

4.1. Delimitation approaches

4.1.1. Morphological delimitation

Morphological delimitation defines rurality through the spatial form

Table 1
European rural classification approaches: Logics, contributions, and analytical implications.

Layer	Approach Type	Core Classification Logic	Typical Examples	Key Contribution	Critical risk
Delimitation	Morphological/ Density-based	Density, settlement form, contiguity	DEGURBA (2021) OECD regional typology (2019)	Comparable rural/urban boundaries	Reduces rurality to spatial form
	Functional Area-based	Travel time, services, commuting, flows	JRC Functional Rural Areas (2024) OECD Functional Urban Areas INSEE zoning in urban areas	Captures urban–rural interdependence	Makes rurality centre-dependent
Differentiation	Structural	Infrastructure, economy, services, land use	EDORA typology INSEE rural/urban zoning ANCT territorial categories	Measures rural variation	Treats attributes as causes
	Territorial Integration	Proximity/connectivity to urban systems	Brezzi et al. (2011) – Rural regions close to cities vs remote; ESPON rural–urban typologies; Italy's Inner Areas Strategy (SNAI)	Shows urban-rural interdependence	Privileges integrated territories
	Demographic	Ageing, migration, growth/decline	ESPON DEMIFER demographic status typology French *Typologie des campagnes françaises*, especially *campagnes vieillies à très faible densité*.	Anticipates service and labour pressures	Produces decline/deficit narratives
	Policy-Driven/ Administrative	Legal status, eligibility, intervention zones	CAP Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC) CAP Less Favoured Areas (LFA) France Ruralités Revitalisation (ZFRR)	Links categories to implementation	Rewards administrative capacity
	Landscape/ Morphological	Land cover, climate, ecological conditions	National Character Areas (NCAs), England environmental zoning schemes (Natura 2000)	Integrates environmental differentiation	Aestheticises or depoliticises land
	Hybrid/Systemic	Multiple combined indicators	French DATAR-INRAE *Typologie des campagnes françaises*	Captures multidimensional complexity	Risks adding indicators without changing logic
	Scenario-based	Plausible futures and transition pathways	FARO-EU foresight rural typology SHERPA foresight prospects for EU rural areas	Opens future-oriented policy learning	Reproduces dominant imaginaries

Note: The table synthesises classification logic rather than ranking individual frameworks. Examples and source documents are listed in Appendix A. The critical risk column summarises the main relational or spatial justice concern associated with each logic when it informs policy, funding, or territorial narratives.

of settlement. It commonly relies on population density, settlement size, built-up contiguity, land use, and grid-based procedures to distinguish urban, intermediate, and rural areas. Examples include the Degree of Urbanisation, OECD density-based regional classifications, and national settlement-contiguity approaches such as INSEE's urban units. Its main contribution is statistical comparability: morphological criteria are transparent, replicable, and suitable for harmonised monitoring across countries and over time.

Its limitation is that spatial form becomes a proxy for rural position. Low density or dispersed settlement may describe the material pattern of a territory, but it says little about how that territory is connected to labour markets, infrastructure, tourism, commodity chains, environmental regulation, or political institutions. In the relational spatial lens, morphological delimitation is therefore strongest in institutionalisation, because it produces clear categories for statistical and administrative use, but weaker in positioning and symbolisation Fig. 2.

The spatial justice risks follow from this simplification. Morphological categories can make rural difference appear mainly as spatial thinness: fewer people, smaller settlements, weaker concentration, or lower urban intensity. This may support deficit readings when density-based categories are used as shorthand for social or economic weakness. The distributive dimension becomes important when density thresholds are linked to governance priorities. Territories just above or below a threshold may be treated differently despite sharing similar needs. The recognitional and procedural dimensions remain weaker because local meanings, lived rural practices, and participation in category-making are usually outside the classification logic.

4.1.2. Functional area-based delimitation

Functional area-based delimitation defines rurality through patterns of access, mobility, service use, and labour-market integration. It relies on relations such as commuting flows, travel time, service catchments, and proximity to urban or regional centres. Examples include Functional Urban Areas, Functional Rural Areas, and accessibility-based classifications used in European and OECD frameworks (OECD, 2019; Mantino et al., 2023; Stjernberg et al., 2023). Its main contribution is that it moves beyond settlement form and recognises that rural territories are shaped by daily-life relations, service systems, and interdependence with surrounding centres.

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, functional delimitation is strongest in positioning, because it captures how rural areas are located within wider labour, service, and mobility systems. It also has a strong distributive value, since access to schools, hospitals, employment, public transport, and administrative centres is central to service planning and territorial policy. However, its relational reading remains selective. It often privileges measurable flows towards centres, especially commuting and travel time, while paying less attention to local economic circuits, informal care systems, seasonal labour, environmental functions, or rural-to-rural relations Fig. 3.

The main justice risk lies in the assumptions built into accessibility measures. A territory may appear functionally connected because it is within a defined travel-time threshold, while some residents remain practically excluded because of age, disability, income, gendered care responsibilities, limited public transport, or precarious migrant labour conditions. The recognitional and procedural dimensions are therefore weaker when functional categories are produced through expert-defined centres and thresholds without local validation. Functional delimitation makes important relations visible, but it can also frame rural areas mainly through their dependence on urban or service centres.

4.2. Differentiation aprroaches

4.2.1. Structural approaches

Structural approaches differentiate rural territories through "stock-based" characteristics, such as demography, housing, accessibility, infrastructure, services, employment structure, economic profile, and sometimes landscape or built-environment morphology (Stjernberg et al., 2023). Their main contribution is methodological transparency. By relying on measurable and comparable attributes, they allow rural territories to be benchmarked across regions and scales, making them

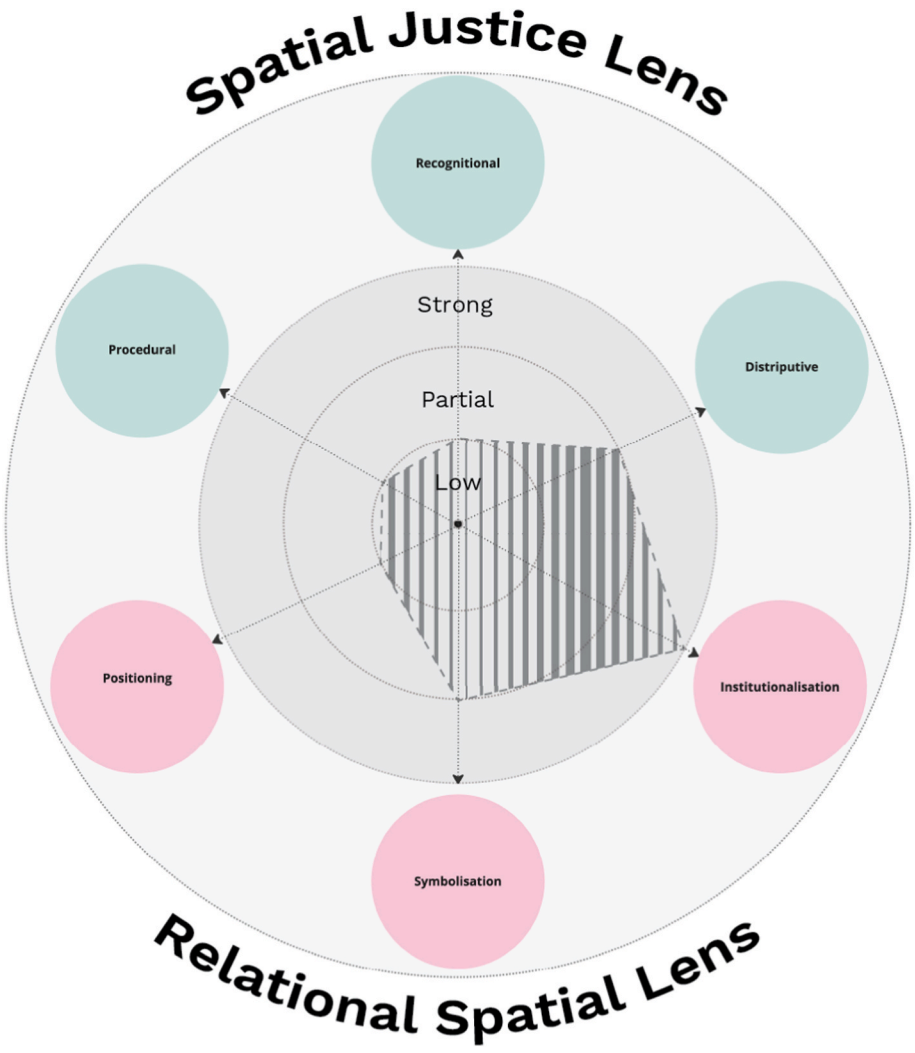


Fig. 2. Qualitative analytical profile of morphological delimitation across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

useful for monitoring, evaluation, and policy targeting.

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, structural approaches are strongest in institutionalisation because they translate territorial variation into indicators that can be used by statistical agencies, planning authorities, and funding programmes. Their limits appear in positioning and symbolisation. Structural variables describe conditions, but they rarely explain how those conditions are produced through market extraction, state investment, institutional withdrawal, labour restructuring, or long-term uneven development. Rural position is therefore treated as a bundle of attributes rather than as a relational configuration Fig. 4.

The Spatial Justice Lens highlights a related risk. Structural indicators can make inequality appear as a territorial trait: poor, remote, ageing, under-served, or economically weak. This can be useful for identifying need, but it may also frame rural disadvantage as an internal condition of place rather than as an outcome of wider political-economic relations. The distributive dimension is therefore relatively strong, because structural typologies can support resource allocation and targeting. The recognitional and procedural dimensions are weaker, since local meanings, contested histories, and participation in defining indicators are usually outside the classification logic.

4.2.2. Territorial integration approaches

Territorial integration approaches differentiate rural areas according to their degree of connection to wider urban, regional, or metropolitan systems. They commonly use indicators such as proximity to cities, commuting intensity, accessibility, service reach, transport connectivity, and integration into labour-market regions. Examples include urban-rural typologies based on metropolitan influence, accessibility gradients, and classifications that distinguish accessible, intermediate, remote, or peripheral rural areas (ESPON, 2011; OECD, 2019; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, these approaches are strong in positioning because they explicitly locate rural territories within wider spatial systems. They show that rurality is not only a matter of settlement form, but also of connection, dependence, accessibility, and interaction. Their institutional value is also significant, since integration categories are often useful for regional planning, infrastructure policy, cohesion policy, and service provision Fig. 5.

Their limitation lies in the type of integration they privilege. Rural territories are often assessed according to their connection to urban centres, labour markets, or transport corridors. This can make urban integration appear as the main measure of territorial advantage, while other forms of rural value, such as ecological stewardship, food production, care networks, cultural landscapes, or rural-to-rural relations, remain less visible. In terms of symbolisation, poorly connected areas may be framed as remote, lagging, or weakly integrated, even when their marginality is produced by historical underinvestment or uneven

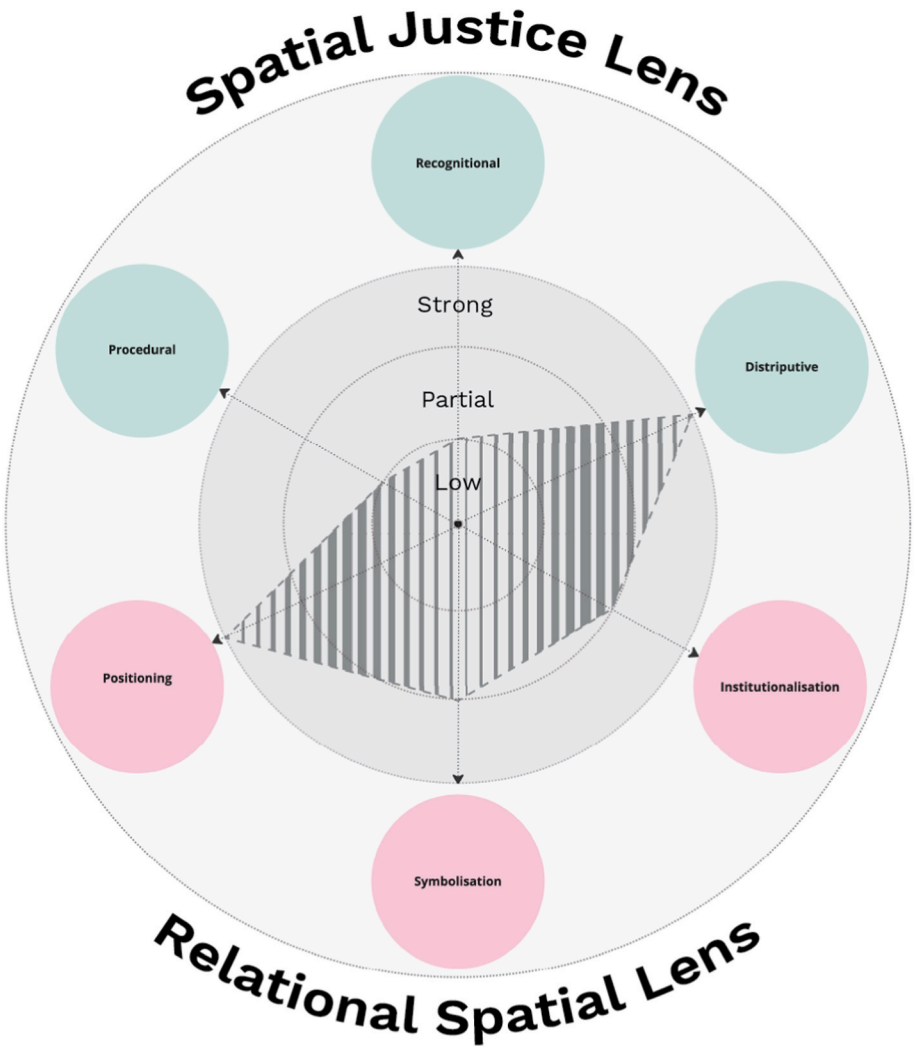


Fig. 3. Qualitative analytical profile of functional area-based delimitation across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

state presence.

The Spatial Justice Lens highlights both value and risk. The distributive dimension is strong because integration approaches can identify gaps in access, infrastructure, and connectivity. However, the recognitional and procedural dimensions are weaker when territorial value is judged mainly through proximity to urban systems. These approaches can support better territorial targeting, but they may also reproduce an urban-centred understanding of rural development if integration is treated as the main route to improvement.

4.2.3. Demographic approaches

Demographic approaches differentiate rural territories through population change, ageing, migration, household composition, fertility, depopulation, and sometimes seasonal or second-home dynamics. They are especially common in analyses of shrinking, ageing, and sparsely populated regions, where demographic indicators are used to identify territories facing labour-market decline, service pressure, or long-term population loss (ESPON, 2017; OECD, 2019; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, demographic approaches are partially strong in positioning because they capture how rural territories are affected by mobility, migration, generational change, and uneven settlement dynamics. However, demographic variables often describe outcomes more clearly than causes. Ageing, outmigration, or population decline may reflect wider processes such as labour-market restructuring, housing affordability, education centralisation, care infrastructure, agricultural change, or selective state investment. Their institutionalisation is strong because demographic indicators are widely available, comparable, and easily integrated into planning, service provision, and cohesion policy Fig. 6.

The main symbolic risk is that demographic categories can attach decline-oriented meanings to rural territories. Labels such as shrinking, ageing, depopulating, or sparsely populated can help identify real pressures, but they may also reinforce imaginaries of rural areas as demographically exhausted or socially unsustainable. This matters for the recognitional dimension, because demographic fragility can overshadow local capacities, intergenerational support systems, new migrant settlement, informal care practices, or alternative rural futures.

From the Spatial Justice Lens, the distributive value of demographic approaches is strong. They help identify where schools, healthcare, mobility services, housing, and care infrastructures are under pressure. The procedural dimension is weaker because demographic categories are usually produced through expert-defined indicators, with limited attention to how residents themselves understand demographic change. Their justice relevance therefore depends on whether demographic vulnerability is used to support territorial care, or whether it becomes another shorthand for rural decline.

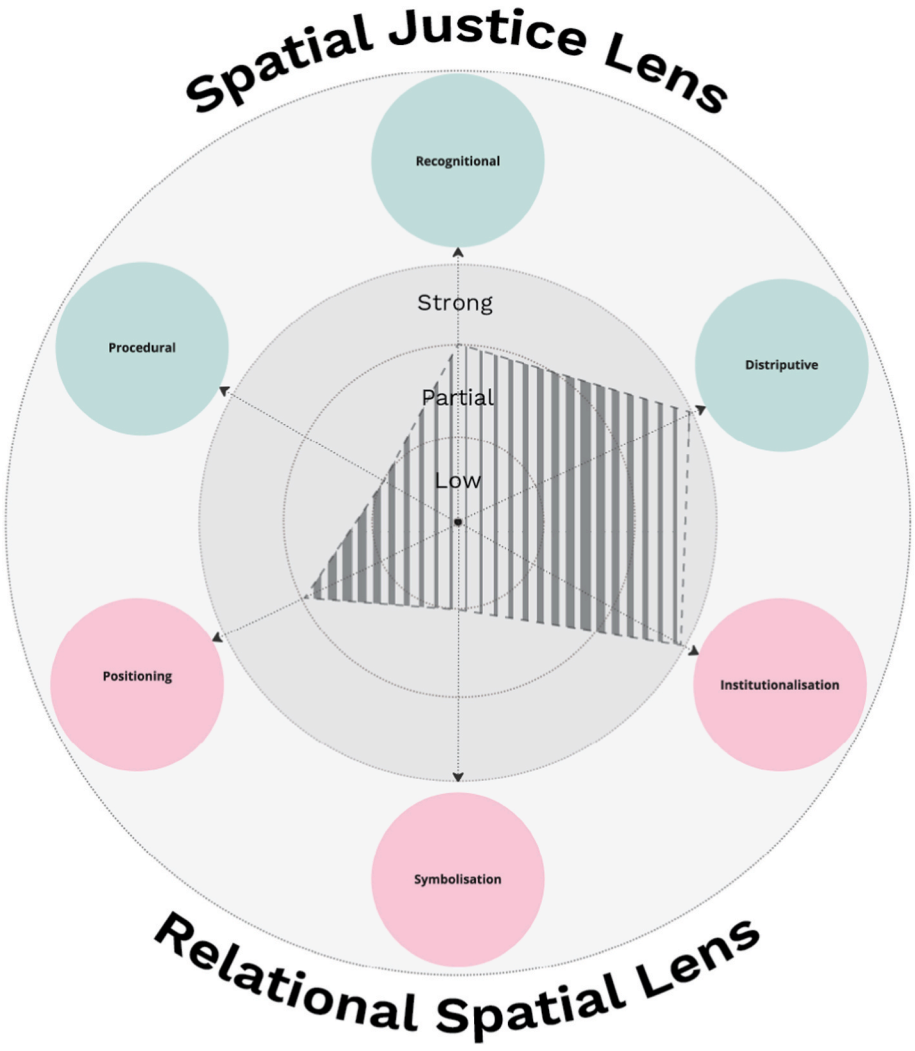


Fig. 4. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of structural typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

4.2.4. Policy-driven and administrative approaches

Policy-driven and administrative approaches define rural territories through institutional mandates, eligibility rules, programme geographies, or national planning categories. Rather than starting from a single statistical definition of rurality, they classify territories according to the needs of policy delivery, funding allocation, service planning, or territorial development. Examples include rural development programme areas, cohesion policy categories, LEADER territories, and national approaches such as Italy's Inner Areas Strategy, where territorial classification is linked to service access and policy intervention (Barca et al., 2014; ESPON, 2010; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, these approaches are strongest in institutionalisation. Their categories are designed to travel directly into governance practice, making them powerful tools for targeting, monitoring, and allocating resources. They can also support positioning when they identify territories through service access, administrative capacity, or development need. However, their symbolic effects depend on how policy labels are constructed. Categories such as disadvantaged, lagging, inner, remote, or fragile may help justify intervention, but they can also attach deficit meanings to territories if they become detached from the structural causes of inequality Fig. 7.

From the Spatial Justice Lens, the distributive dimension is strong because these approaches are directly connected to eligibility, funding, and service provision. Their recognitional and procedural dimensions are more uneven. Some policy-driven classifications are place-sensitive and involve local actors, while others are expert-led and shaped by administrative convenience. The main justice risk is that territories become legible only through the categories that institutions can fund, monitor, or manage. This can narrow the range of recognised rural needs and capacities, especially where local communities or weaker municipalities have limited voice in defining the categories that govern them.

4.2.5. Landscape and morphological approaches

Landscape and morphological approaches differentiate rural territories through land cover, settlement form, landscape character, agricultural structure, built-up patterns, and environmental features. They are often used to capture visible territorial forms, such as open countryside, forested areas, agricultural landscapes, dispersed settlements, coastal zones, mountain areas, or peri-urban landscapes. Examples include landscape character assessments, land-use-based classifications, and rural typologies that combine morphology with environmental or settlement indicators (Council of Europe, 2000; ESPON, 2011; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, these approaches are strongest in symbolisation because they make rurality visible through landscape meanings, territorial identity, and material form. They can recognise rural areas as culturally and environmentally distinctive, rather than only as low-density or economically weak spaces. Their positioning

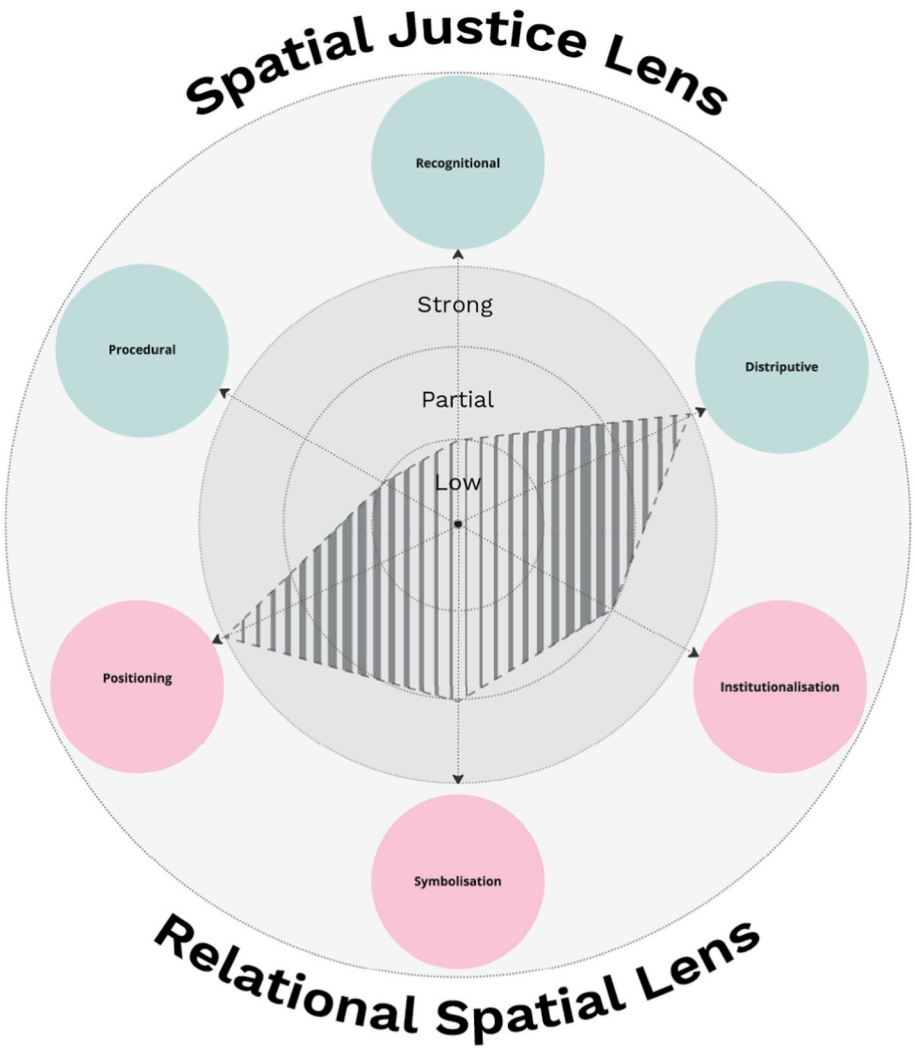


Fig. 5. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of territorial integration typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework. Source: The authors.

dimension is weaker when landscape is treated mainly as a visual or physical attribute rather than as the outcome of agricultural labour, property relations, tourism, conservation policy, infrastructure, or environmental regulation Fig. 8.

From the Spatial Justice Lens, these approaches have recognitional value because they can foreground place-based identity, ecological value, heritage, and rural distinctiveness. However, they may also aestheticise rural territories by privileging scenery, environmental quality, or heritage landscapes while underplaying labour conditions, housing pressure, service access, land ownership, or social inequality. Their distributive dimension is partial when landscape categories inform conservation, tourism, planning restrictions, or environmental funding. The procedural dimension depends on whether local residents, farmers, land users, and marginalised groups participate in defining the landscape values attached to their territory.

The main risk is that rural areas become valued mainly as landscapes to be protected, consumed, or managed, rather than as lived and contested socio-spatial relations.

4.2.6. Hybrid and systemic approaches

Hybrid and systemic approaches combine several dimensions of rural differentiation within a single typology. They usually bring together demographic change, accessibility, economic structure, settlement form, service provision, land use, environmental conditions, and sometimes governance or institutional indicators. Examples include ESPON/EDORA-style typologies and more recent European frameworks that seek to capture rural diversity through multidimensional indicator sets rather than a single defining criterion (Copus et al., 2011; ESPON, 2011; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, hybrid approaches are relatively strong in positioning because they can capture several territorial relations at once, including access, economic restructuring, demographic change, and environmental pressures. They are also strong in institutionalisation when their indicators are standardised, comparable, and useable for monitoring or policy targeting. Their symbolic effects are more ambivalent. On the one hand, multidimensional classifications can move beyond simple labels such as remote or declining. On the other hand, they may still produce simplified territorial identities if complex indicator combinations are translated into fixed categories Fig. 9.

From the Spatial Justice Lens, the distributive dimension is usually strong because hybrid typologies can identify overlapping needs and support more differentiated policy responses. Their recognitional value is partial: they can represent rural diversity more accurately than single-variable approaches, but they still depend on which indicators are selected and which forms of rural life become measurable. The procedural dimension is often weaker because these classifications are usually expert-led and data-driven, with limited involvement of local actors in defining categories, thresholds, or territorial meanings.

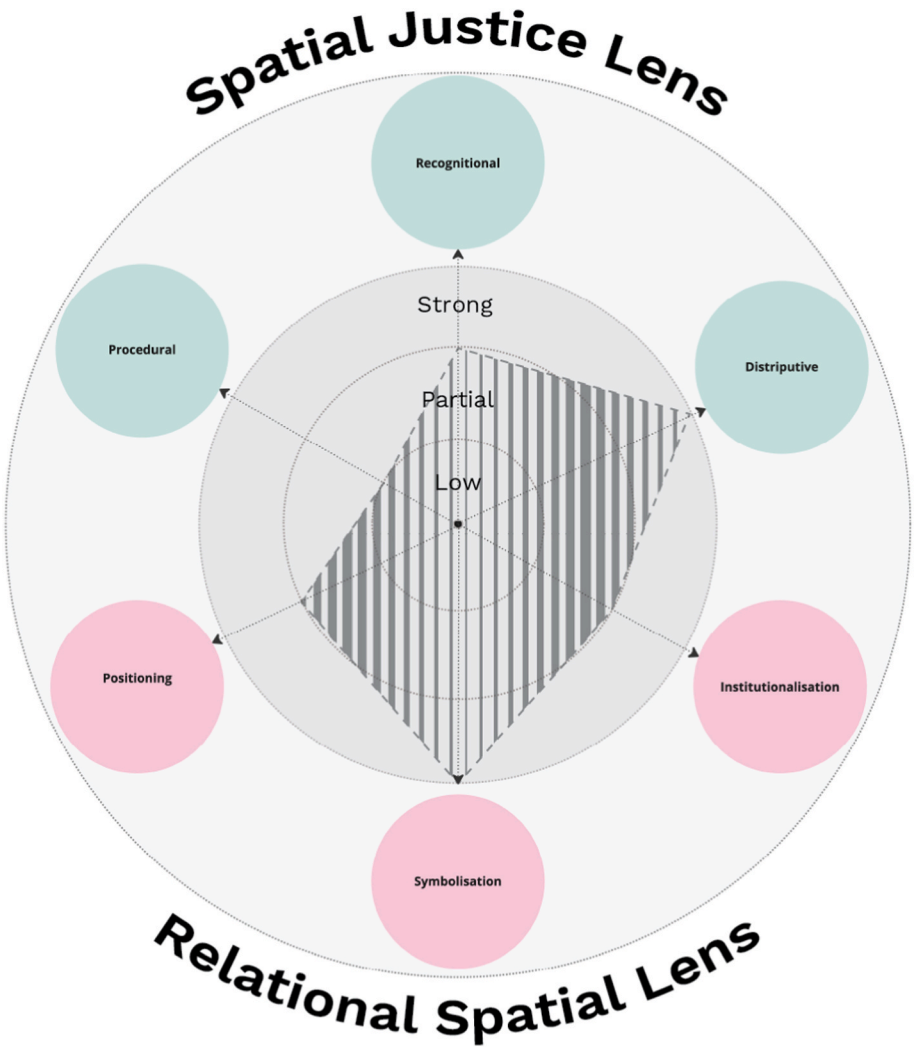


Fig. 6. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of demographic typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework. Source: The authors.

The main risk is opacity. As typologies become more complex, their categories may appear more comprehensive while becoming harder to interpret, contest, or use politically by the territories they classify.

4.2.7. Scenario-based approaches (foresight-oriented differentiation)

Scenario-based approaches differentiate rural territories according to possible future trajectories rather than only present conditions. They use foresight methods, modelling, trend analysis, or exploratory narratives to classify territories through expected demographic change, economic restructuring, climate exposure, land-use transitions, service futures, or development pathways. Examples include ESPON scenario work, rural foresight exercises, and policy-oriented typologies that distinguish territories by vulnerability, resilience, transition capacity, or strategic potential (Arcuri and Brunori, 2023; ESPON, 2014; Copus et al., 2011; Stjernberg et al., 2023).

Within the Relational Spatial Lens, scenario-based approaches are strong in positioning because they locate rural territories within wider transition processes, including climate adaptation, energy transition, digitalisation, migration, food systems, and regional restructuring. They also have symbolic significance because they do not only describe what a territory is, but also imagine what it could become. This can open space for more dynamic rural futures. However, it can also attach anticipatory labels such as vulnerable, declining, resilient, adaptive, or high-potential Fig. 10.

From the Spatial Justice Lens, the distributive dimension is important because scenario categories can influence strategic investment, adaptation funding, infrastructure planning, and long-term policy priorities. Their recognitional value depends on whether futures are framed through local capacities and diverse rural aspirations, or mainly through external policy objectives. The procedural dimension is especially relevant, since foresight is political: the selection of trends, risks, indicators, and desired futures shapes whose rural future becomes visible.

The main risk is that scenario-based classifications may present uncertain futures as stable territorial pathways. Their justice value depends on whether they are used reflexively, with attention to uncertainty, participation, and alternative rural futures.

4.3. Synthesising rural classification logics

Table 1 synthesises the reviewed typology approaches by grouping them according to their main classificatory logic, contribution, and critical risk. It functions as a compact map of how different classification logics make rural territories legible: what they foreground, what they simplify, and what relational or spatial justice concerns they may leave in the background.

To keep the synthesis readable, the table summarises each approach through six fields: layer, approach type, core classification logic, typical examples, key contribution, and critical risk. Examples and source

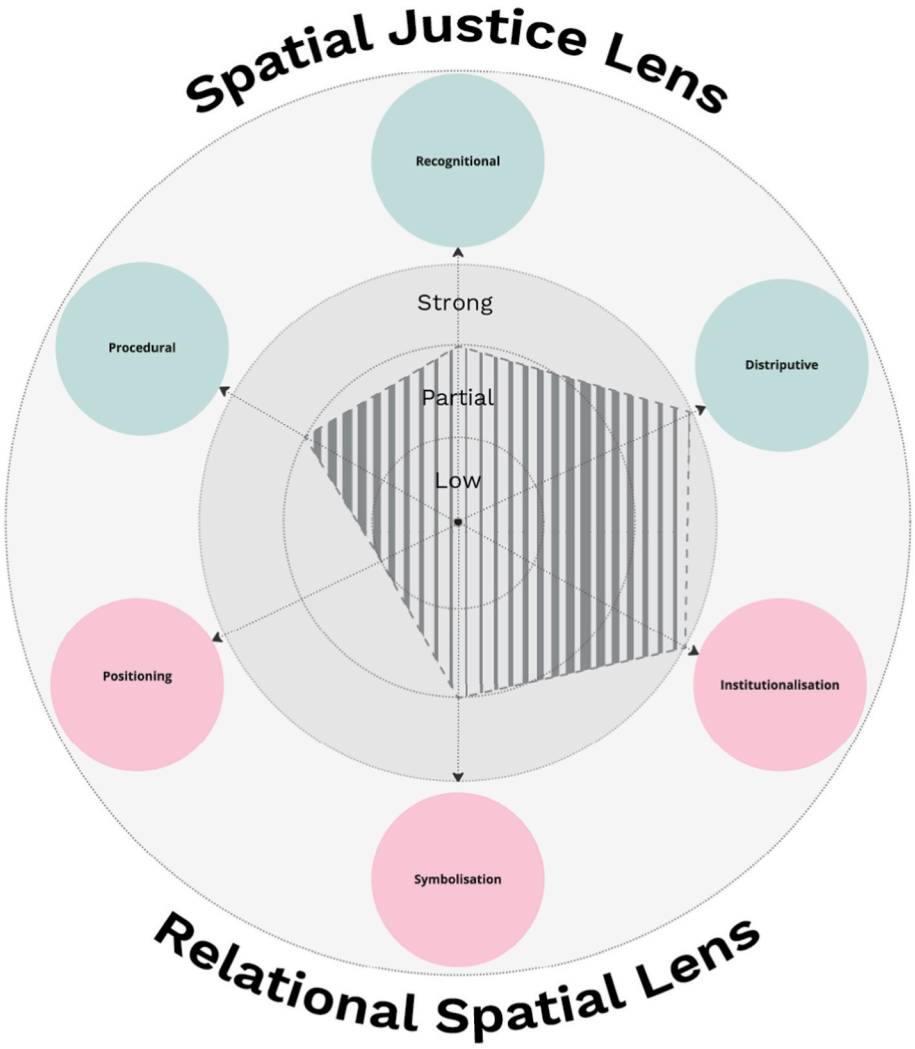


Fig. 7. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of policy-driven and administrative typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

documents are provided in Appendix A. The final column condenses the main relational or justice-related risk associated with each logic when it becomes linked to policy, funding, service provision, or territorial narratives. This prepares the ground for the discussion of typologies as governance infrastructures with distributive, recognitional, and procedural effects (Bowker and Star, 1999; Scott, 1998; Young, 1990; Fraser, 2009; Soja, 2010).

Read together with the qualitative analytical profiles, the synthesis shows a recurring pattern. Most classification logics are strongest where rurality can be measured, compared, institutionalised, and used for policy targeting. They are weaker where rurality must be recognised, contested, or explained relationally. Morphological, structural, and policy-driven approaches foreground comparability, monitoring, and institutional uptake, but tend to under-capture lived meanings, symbolic effects, and participation. Functional and territorial integration approaches capture positioning more explicitly, yet often through centre-based connectivity and access. Hybrid and scenario-based approaches widen the analytical frame, although multidimensionality and future-orientation still depend on which indicators, assumptions, and voices are included. The key analytical question is how each classificatory logic produces a specific balance between technical legibility and relational or justice sensitivity. This synthesis therefore bridges the review of typology approaches with the discussion of their implications for rural governance, resource allocation, and territorial recognition.

5. Discussion: Classifying the rural, epistemic limits and political stakes

European rural typologies operate through recurring classification logics that do more than measuring rural areas. They position territories within governance frameworks by defining what counts as rural difference, which forms of need become visible, what development trajectories are available, and what kinds of intervention appear appropriate. Read through the relational and spatial justice lens developed in Section 2, typologies emerge as instruments of territorial ordering that shape visibility, legitimacy, eligibility, and intervention, namely when connected to governance instruments.

This discussion draws out three cross-cutting patterns from the comparative matrix. These concern how classification orders territory, what dominant typologies systematically under-capture, and how these blind spots matter for spatial justice.

5.1. *What current typologies under-capture*

Reading across the typologies reviewed in Table 1 reveals three dimensions that remain unevenly integrated into dominant classification

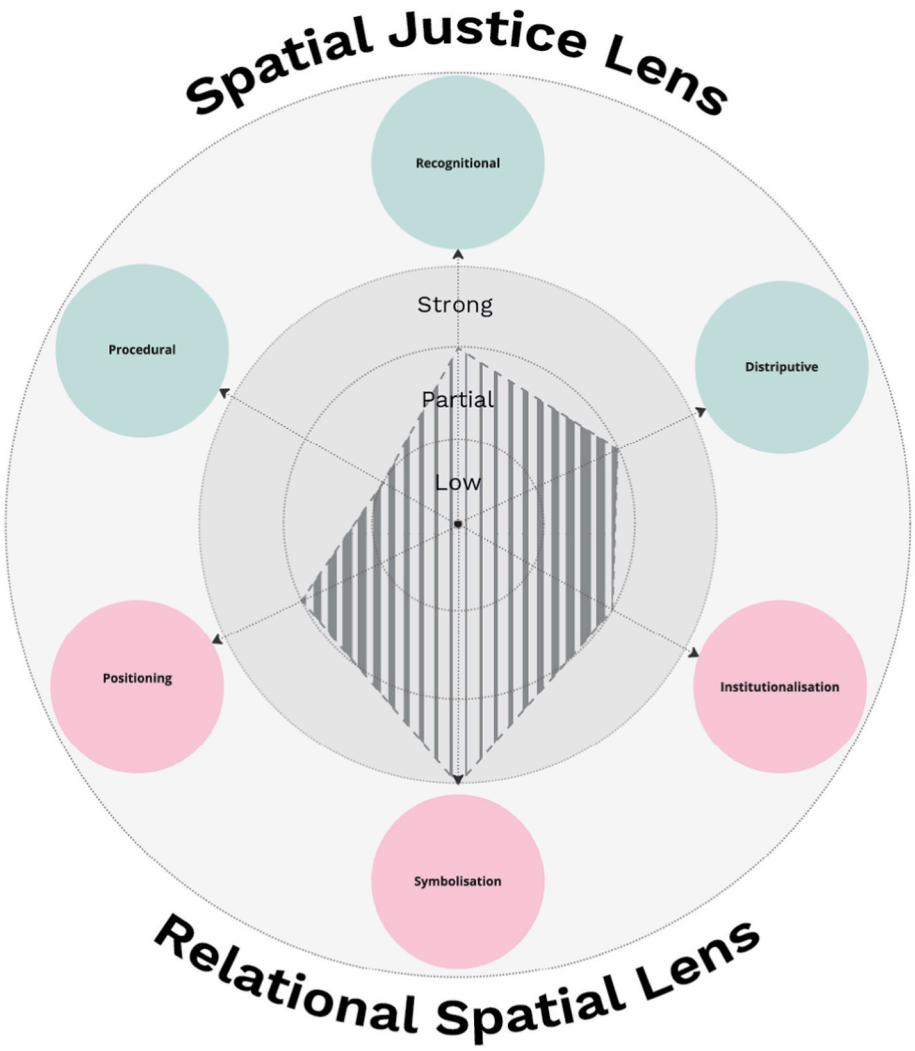


Fig. 8. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of landscape typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

logic. These limitations do not affect all typologies in the same way. Morphological and structural approaches are more likely to under-capture relational positioning; demographic and remoteness-based approaches are more likely to stabilise deficit labels; and policy-driven classifications are more likely to translate administrative capacity into eligibility and access.

First, relational positioning is underspecified. While some frameworks incorporate functional integration, most treat rural units as spatial containers characterised by internal attributes, such as density, infrastructure, and demographics, rather than as nodes within broader socio-economic networks. Woods' conception of the global countryside (2007; 2016) suggests that rural space is constituted through multi-scalar relations. Yet typologies rarely capture how territories are positioned within global commodity chains, governance circuits, or financial flows. The OECD Extended Regional Typology partially addresses this problem by distinguishing rural regions close to a city from remote rural regions, using travel time to a populated centre of at least 50,000 inhabitants (Brezzi et al., 2011). This improves the reading of accessibility, but it still treats relationality mainly as distance to an urban centre. It does not capture, for example, whether a remote agricultural region is tied to export markets, renewable energy infrastructure, seasonal labour regimes, or tourism investment. Rurality is therefore measured, but not fully relationally situated.

Second, symbolic recognition remains implicit. Categories such as "peripheral," "lagging," or "remote" carry reputational weight. Wacquant's work on territorial labelling (2007; 2023) shows how such designations can sediment into institutional responses. Italy's Inner Areas Strategy (SNAI) illustrates this tension. Its classification of inner areas through distance from essential service centres is useful for directing investment toward places affected by demographic decline and service gaps. Yet the same category may also situate territories within a vocabulary of remoteness and fragility, especially when the label travels beyond its diagnostic purpose into political and public discourse. The issue is not that such categories are inaccurate, but that their symbolic effects are rarely assessed. Most typologies treat categories as technical descriptors rather than labels that may influence investment expectations, policy narratives, and local self-perception.

Third, institutional capacity and governance dynamics are often peripheral to classification logic. Policy-driven frameworks link categories to intervention instruments, yet few typologies systematically assess the uneven capacity of territories to navigate bureaucratic systems or mobilise institutional capital. This risk is visible in rural development zones and funding-linked classifications, such as France's former Zones de Revitalisation Rurale (ZRR) and the newer France Ruralités Revitalisation (ZFRR) framework. ZFRR replaced ZRR on 1 July 2024 and aims to increase the attractiveness of vulnerable rural areas through fiscal and social support measures for eligible firms (Service-Public.fr, 2024). The ANCT comparative report similarly describes ZRR as a

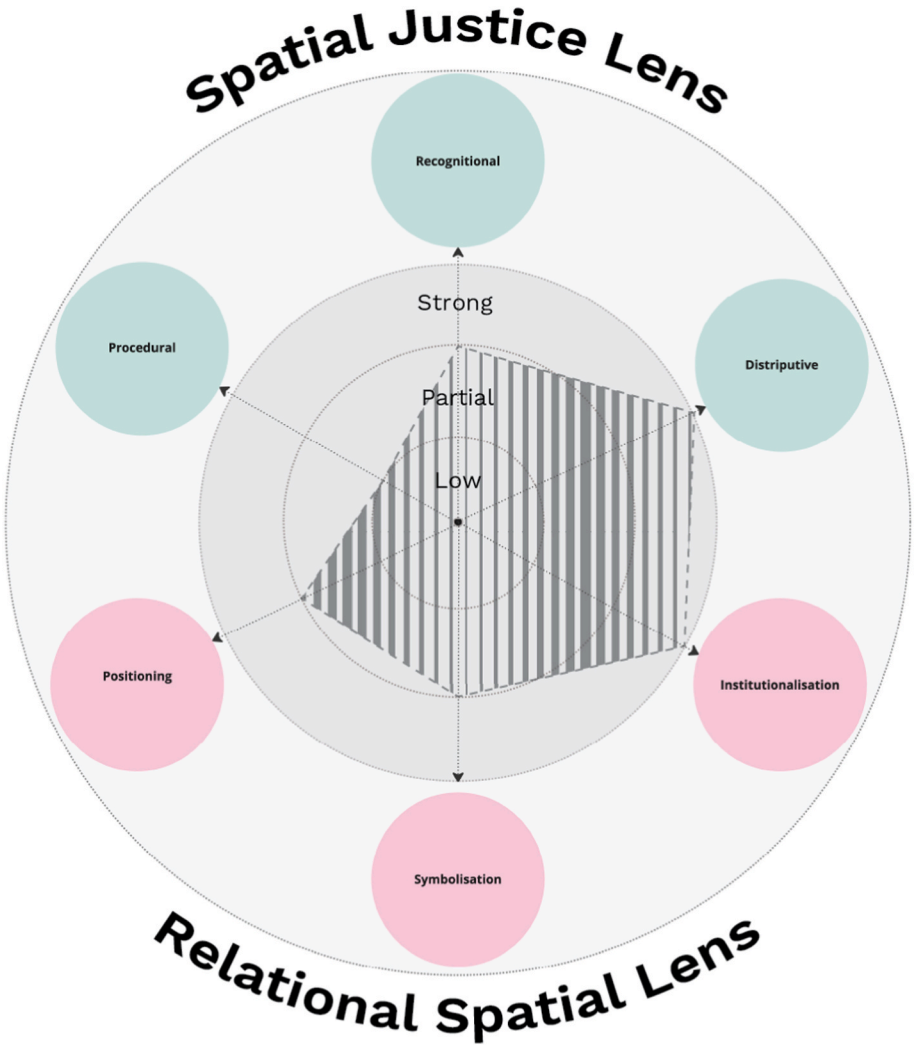


Fig. 9. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of hybrid typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework.
Source: The authors.

French instrument targeting rural zones with low population and demographic or economic decline through tax-based and social measures (ANCT, 2024). Yet the benefits of such instruments are not automatic. They depend on eligibility rules, administrative procedures, and the ability of firms, municipalities, and local actors to identify, claim, and implement the available support. Evidence from EU territorial and rural development policy shows that administrative performance, governance quality, delivery complexity, and administrative burden shape how place-based instruments are absorbed and implemented (Mendez and Bachtler, 2024; Kah, 2024). Policy classifications may therefore identify territorial need on paper while still favouring actors and places with stronger administrative competence.

These limitations do not invalidate existing typologies but reflect the constraints of designing harmonised, scalable classification systems. They show that different classification logics carry different analytical risks, whose relevance depends on how typological categories are taken up in policy narratives, eligibility rules, administrative procedures, and funding systems. The main concern is the limited reflexivity around what each logic systematically foregrounds and what it leaves outside the frame.

5.2. *Spatial justice implications*

If classification structures visibility and intervention, it also mediates justice outcomes. The justice question concerns how typological categories shape access to resources, public narratives, and decision-making power. The examples below show that particular classification logics are more likely to generate specific justice risks once they are coupled to policy instruments.

Regarding distribution, typologies influence where infrastructure, services, and financial resources are allocated. Threshold-based delimitation can shift eligibility status through small demographic or density changes. Italy's National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), for example, classifies municipalities according to their distance from essential service centres and uses this geography to target interventions aimed at improving access to transport, education, health and social services while supporting local development (OpenCoesione, n.d.; OECD, 2024). This makes service distance politically visible and can redirect support toward territories affected by demographic decline. Yet it also shows how distributive justice depends on the chosen threshold and on which services are treated as essential. A municipality's position inside or outside a designated geography can affect whether it becomes eligible for integrated investment or remains outside the main policy frame. Integration-oriented classifications may prioritise territories already connected to metropolitan cores, while more isolated areas remain harder to justify in cost-benefit terms. In this sense, classification functions as a distributive filter.

Regarding recognition, rural territories are frequently homogenised

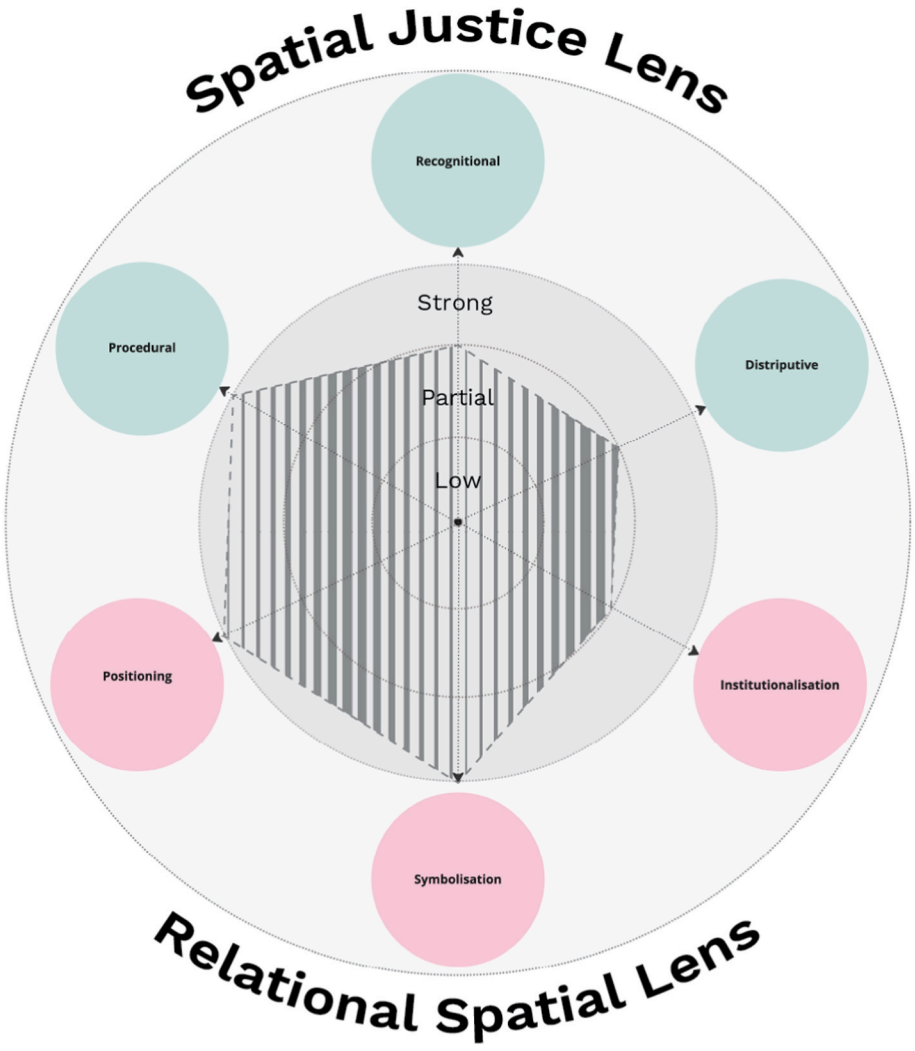


Fig. 10. Presents the qualitative analytical profile of scenario-based typologies across six dimensions derived from the paper's theoretical framework. Source: The authors.

under broad density-based or administrative codes. Young (1990) emphasises that injustice can operate through misrecognition when differentiated identities and conditions are flattened or marginalised. This links recognition to symbolic power: rural categories do not simply name places, but may affect how their capacities, futures, and claims are valued by institutions. Demographic classifications illustrate this risk. ESPON DEMIFER, for instance, differentiates European regions through demographic and migratory variables, including the share of young adults, the share of older residents, natural population increase, and net migration, producing types such as "Challenge of Ageing" and "Challenge of Decline" (ESPON DEMIFER, 2010). Such categories are analytically useful because they identify demographic pressures and policy needs. Yet if they travel into policy discourse without qualification, they can reduce places to decline, ageing, or labour-force shortage, obscuring local capacities, attachment, care networks, and alternative development trajectories. The recognitional issue is therefore not the use of demographic data itself but the risk that demographic labels become deficit narratives.

Regarding procedure, most typologies are designed by statistical agencies, planning authorities, or expert consortia. This limits rural participation in defining the categories, indicators, and thresholds that govern rural territories. DEGURBA illustrates the expert-led side of this problem. It offers a harmonised and replicable classification of cities, towns and semi-dense areas, and rural areas by using 1 km^2 population grids, density and contiguity rules, and fixed population-share thresholds for small spatial units (European Commission: Eurostat, 2021, pp. 40–41). Its strength is comparability, but the categories are produced through technical rules, not through deliberation with the populations classified by them. LEADER/CLLD moves in the opposite direction by formally requiring local action groups and bottom-up strategy-making. LEADER/CLLD refers to EU rural and community-led local development instruments based on local partnerships and local development strategies. ESPON describes LEADER as an integrated territorial approach that brings local actors together to design local development strategies and empower rural actors (ESPON, 2004, p. 130). Yet the same source notes that decentralised implementation increased administrative tasks and that formalisation partly "watered down" the original bottom-up approach (ESPON, 2004, p. 130). Evidence from multi-funded CLLD shows that administrative burden is a key challenge, especially where different funds involve different application procedures, reporting requirements, and coordination demands (Kah, 2024, p. 12). From a justice perspective, the question is therefore who has the capacity and standing to shape, access, and use the categories and procedures through which rural needs become governable.

5.3. *Implications for future typology practice*

The critique developed here does not call for abandoning typologies.

Classification remains necessary for coordinating policy across territorially diverse contexts. European governance needs shared spatial languages to allocate resources, monitor cohesion, and design intervention instruments. The question is therefore how rural classification can become more reflexive, relational, and justice-aware. The review suggests four implications for future typology practice.

5.3.1. *Reflexivity in delimitation*

Delimitation thresholds, whether based on density, settlement form, or functional integration, are often treated as technical necessities. Yet they embed assumptions about what constitutes rurality and which territorial forms matter. A reflexive typology would make these assumptions explicit by documenting the rationale behind threshold selection and assessing its distributive effects. Small changes in density cut-offs or commuting criteria can shift territorial eligibility for programmes, with material implications. Thresholds should therefore be treated as consequential choices rather than neutral technical decisions. Operationally, this would require indicator architectures that allow thresholds to be adjusted and contextualised rather than applied uniformly. Thresholds could be assigned to a confidence level, for example by distinguishing between robust data and proxy estimates, making the degree of certainty behind classifications more transparent (Höller et al., 2026). This is particularly relevant for borderline cases where small shifts can produce significant consequences for eligibility. Dynamic dashboards could also support more transparent updates as indicators evolve, replacing periodic reclassification with a more continuous process of territorial monitoring (Young and Kitchin, 2020).

5.3.2. *Transparency in the coupling between classification and intervention*

Many typologies are directly or indirectly linked to funding instruments, regulatory regimes, or strategic priorities. Yet the relationship between category assignment and policy allocation is rarely examined critically. A justice-oriented approach would clarify how categories translate into intervention pathways: which categories trigger support, which risks are neglected, and how regional, national, and EU priorities align or conflict through classification. This also requires attention to the science-policy interface. The recent Italian classification of mountain municipalities shows how policy can reassert simple morphological criteria, such as altitude and slope, even when territorial actors argue for more relational criteria, including accessibility, depopulation, infrastructure, productive activities, and territorial fragility (Presidency of the Council of Ministers, 2026; Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2026). Such cases show that scientific and technical knowledge may also contest politically authorised classifications, rather than simply support them. Making these couplings explicit would help move typologies from abstract categorisation toward more accountable governance tools. A dashboard infrastructure could support this by showing which classification assignments activate which instruments, and where conflicts emerge across policy domains (Höller et al., 2026). This would treat classification and allocation as interdependent stages of territorial governance rather than separate technical decisions.

5.3.3. *Incorporating relational positioning*

As discussed in Section 2, rural territories are embedded within multi-scalar assemblages of capital, labour, governance, and infrastructure (Woods, 2007, 2016). Yet many existing typologies remain anchored in internal attributes, such as density, demographics, or sectoral composition, rather than external positioning. Future typology practice would benefit from indicators that capture relational exposure and dependency: economic concentration, infrastructural centrality or peripherality, governance connectivity, dependence on external labour or investment, and vulnerability to global market shifts. This would supplement structural measures with a clearer understanding of rural territories as nodes within wider spatial systems. Indicators of this kind capture spatial spillovers, functional linkages, and external pressures. Relevant data would need to be projected across scales, rather than tied only to rigid administrative boundaries. Given that consistent data quality across Europe remains difficult to achieve, context-sensitive indicators could be integrated into a modular setting: statistical data for data-rich domains and locations, proxies for uncertain trends, and locally generated data for data-poor contexts. In such cases, the priority is not the standardisation of one indicator, but the diagnosis of the dependency being examined (Höller et al., 2026).

5.3.4. *Attention to recognitional and procedural dimensions*

Spatial justice theory reminds us that classification affects distribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser, 2009; Young, 1990). Rural typologies shape how territories are framed in policy discourse, for example as dynamic, lagging, resilient, vulnerable, or dependent. These framings carry symbolic weight. A reflexive typology would avoid deficit-based narratives and remain attentive to the diversity of rural trajectories. It would also recognise that typology production is usually expert-driven and centralised. While full participatory co-design may not always be feasible at European scale, greater procedural transparency and stakeholder consultation in defining criteria could reduce epistemic closure and strengthen legitimacy. Territorial labs and participatory dashboard tools could allow civil society actors to contribute local data and flag misclassifications. However, these tools can still amplify voices that are already more skilled and networked. Procedural reflexivity therefore requires attention to who is included, whose knowledge is recognised, and on what terms participation takes place.

These implications suggest a shift in orientation, alongside selected technical changes. Typologies do not need to become more complex for their own sake, but to become clearer about their assumptions, more attentive to relational positioning, and more transparent about their governance effects. Such reflexivity would not fully remove the tensions inherent in territorial classification, but it would make them visible and contestable.

6. Conclusion

European rural typologies are governance devices that shape how rural territories are seen, compared, prioritised, and acted upon. At a moment when rural regions are expected to support ecological, digital, demographic, and energy transitions, the classificatory logics that underpin rural policy require closer scrutiny.

The review shows that dominant rural typologies remain strongly shaped by structural-functional logics which tend to privilege measurable territorial attributes. These frameworks provide comparability, support monitoring, and offer operational clarity across heterogeneous European territories. Yet when read through a socio-relational and spatial justice lens, their limits become visible. Many typologies undercapture relational positioning, symbolic recognition, and uneven institutional capacity, as well as lived meanings, local capacities, contested identities, and procedural voices.

The paper makes two contributions. Empirically, it systematises the main classification logics that shape rural governance in Europe and clarifies their contributions, relational blind spots, and spatial justice risks. Conceptually, the paper reframes rural typology-building as a practice of territorial ordering which organises visibility, legitimacy, eligibility, and intervention. Typologies may therefore mediate distributive, recognitional, and procedural effects when categories become linked to funding rules, service standards, strategic priorities, or institutional narratives.

Territorial governance across diverse regions requires shared spatial languages, and typologies remain necessary for coordination, comparison, and policy design. The challenge is to make them more reflexive about their assumptions and more transparent about their governance effects. Within the socio-relational and justice lens developed in this paper, this would require typology designers to document why

particular variables, thresholds, and units are selected; to examine how categories interact with eligibility and resource allocation; to consider how rural territories are positioned within wider relations of infrastructure, labour, capital, services, and institutional capacity; and to avoid deficit framings that reduce rural territories to remoteness, decline, or dependency.

The study also has limitations. It is a theory-guided narrative review rather than a systematic or scoping review. The examples were selected to illustrate classification logics and may not provide exhaustive coverage of all European rural typologies. The analysis is therefore interpretive and may carry a degree of confirmation bias, since the reviewed frameworks were examined through a predefined relational and spatial justice lens. Future research could test these arguments empirically by tracing how specific typological categories affect funding decisions, service provision, territorial narratives, and local governance capacity.

Reclassifying the rural is therefore a conceptual, methodological, and political task. The challenge ahead is to design typologies that make rural complexity legible without flattening it, that support coordination while recognising difference, and that render visible the diverse relational positions and capacities of rural Europe.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Marh Echtai: Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rodrigo V. Cardoso:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration. **Caroline Newton:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Project administration.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT 5.5 to support language editing, readability, and sentence-level refinement. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A

Table A1
Reviewed typologies, classification frameworks, and source documents

Typology/framework	Institution/project	Scale	Used in Table 1 as example of	Source/link
Degree of Urbanisation (DEGURBA)	European Commission/ Eurostat, with FAO, UN-Habitat, ILO, OECD, and World Bank	1 km^2 population grid, then small spatial units such as LAUs, municipalities, census units, or other statistical areas	Morphological/density-based delimitation	European Commission: Eurostat, *Applying the degree of urbanisation – A methodological manual to define cities, towns and rural areas for international comparisons – 2021 edition*, Publications Office of the European Commission, 2021, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2785/706535
OECD TL3 regional typology	OECD	TL3 regions	Morphological/density-based delimitation and territorial integration	OECD, *OECD* OECD, 2019*: Leveraging Megatrends for Cities and Rural Areas*, 2019. URL: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-regional-outlook-2019_9789264312838-en.html
Functional Rural Areas (FRAs)	European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Rural Observatory	1 km^2 grid cells, later assigned to LAUs as Functional Rural Administrative Units (FRAUs)	Functional area-based delimitation	Dijkstra and Jacobs-Crisioni, *Developing a Definition of Functional Rural Areas in the EU*, JRC Working Papers on Territorial Modelling and Analysis No. 11/2023. URL: https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC135599
EU-OECD Functional Urban Area (FUA) definition	OECD and European Commission	1 km^2 population grid, local units, commuting zones	Functional area-based delimitation/territorial integration	Dijkstra, Poelman, and Veneri, *The EU-OECD Definition of a Functional Urban Area*, OECD Regional Development Working Papers 2019/11. URL: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/12/the-eu-oecd-definition-of-a-functional-urban-area_cef4a128/d58cb34d-en.pdf
INSEE Urban Units, *unités urbaines 2020*	INSEE, France	Municipalities, based on continuous built-up areas	Morphological delimitation/ settlement-contiguity approach	Costemalle, Ouija, Guillo, and Chauvet, *Le zonage en unités urbaines 2020*, INSEE Working Paper M2022/02, 2022. URL: https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/6443092
EDORA, European Development	ESPON, 2014 Programme	Mainly NUTS3, with some indicators available only at NUTS2 or higher	Structural differentiation	ESPON EDORA, *European Development Opportunities for Rural Areas, Inception Report*, Version 3, 10 November 2008.

(*continued on next page*)

Table A1 (*continued*)

Typology/framework	Institution/project	Scale	Used in Table 1 as example of	Source/link
Opportunities for Rural Areas				URL: https://archive.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/edora_inception_report-full.pdf
National administrative and policy-linked rural classifications: Typologie de la diversité des ruralités	ANCT, Acadie, Magali Talandier	Communes and EPCI	Policy-driven/administrative differentiation; hybrid/systemic approaches	ANCT, *La diversité des ruralités: typologies et trajectoires des territoires*, 2023. URL: https://www.observatoire-des-territoires.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2023-02/rapport_final_etude_anct_ruralites_-_acadie_-_magali_talandier_-_16_fevrier_2023.pdf
ESPON 1.1.2 Urban-Rural Typology	ESPON 2000-2006 Programme	NUTS3, with tests at NUTS5 for Belgium and Austria	Territorial integration approaches; landscape/morphological approaches	ESPON 1.1.2, *Urban-rural relations in Europe*, Final Report, 2004. URL: https://archive.espon.eu/programme/projects/espon-2006/thematic-projects/urban-rural-relations-europe
OECD Extended Regional Typology	OECD	TL3 regions	Territorial integration approaches; functional/accessibility-based differentiation	Brezzi, Dijkstra, and Ruiz, *OECD Extended Regional Typology: The Economic Performance of Remote Rural Regions*, OECD Regional Development Working Papers 2011/06. URL: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2011/08/oecd-extended-regional-typology_g17a1ff6/5kg6z83tw7f4-en.pdf
Italy's National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI)/Inner Areas classification	Italian Agency for Territorial Cohesion and national cohesion policy framework	Municipalities and selected project areas	Policy-driven and administrative approaches; also relevant to functional/accessibility-based delimitation	OpenCoesione, *National Strategy for Internal Areas*; ISTAT, *Focus Inner Areas 2020*. URL: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/cfe/shrinking-smartly-and-sustainably–compendium-of-good-practices-/multi-level-governance-and-finance/ITALY-National-Strategy-for-Inner-Areas.pdf https://opencoesione.gov.it/en/SNAI/
ESPON DEMIFER, Demographic and Migratory Flows Affecting European Regions and Cities	ESPON 2010 Programme	NUTS2 regions	Demographic approaches	ESPON DEMIFER, *Demographic Diversity of the European Territory: Results from the ESPON DEMIFER Project*, 2010. URL: https://archive.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/demifer_PB_demo_typo.pdf
Typologie des campagnes françaises	DATAR/later referenced by CGET, CNIS and Observatoire des territoires	Communes outside urban units with more than 10,000 jobs	Demographic approaches; national policy-linked rural classifications	Hilal et al., *Typologie des campagnes françaises et des espaces à enjeux spécifiques*, DATAR, 2011/2012; CNIS, *La définition statistique de l'espace rural*, 2020. URL: https://pos-occitanie.fr/files/pdocument/public/r1163_19_travaux_en_l_12_22032012_bd-2.pdf https://www.cnis.fr/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DPR_2%C3%A8me-Com-Territoires_Bilan_gt_rural.pdf
CAP Areas with Natural Constraints (ANC), formerly Less Favoured Areas/disadvantaged areas	European Union, Common Agricultural Policy, implemented by Member States	Agricultural land/designated areas, implemented through national and regional CAP Strategic Plans	Policy-driven and administrative approaches; landscape/environmental constraint approaches	European Commission. 2023. *Payments in Areas with Natural Constraints: Overview and Socio-Economic and Environmental Features of Farming in ANC Areas Based on FADN Data*. Analytical Brief No. 1, July 2023. URL: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/analytical-brief-1-anc-brief_en.pdf
Less Favoured Areas (LFA) schemes	European Union, Common Agricultural Policy, implemented by Member States	Agricultural areas/designated rural zones	Policy-driven and administrative approaches; environmental constraint/disadvantaged-area classifications	European Commission, *Payments in Areas with Natural Constraints*, Analytical Brief No. 1, 2023; Eliasson et al., 2010; UK House of Lords, *The Review of the Less Favoured Areas Scheme*, 2009. URL: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-07/analytical-brief-1-anc-brief_en.pdf
France Ruralités Revitalisation (ZFRR), formerly Zones de Revitalisation Rurale (ZRR)	French state/national rural policy	Municipalities and inter-municipal areas	Policy-driven and administrative approaches; national rural development zones	Service-Public.fr, *Implementation of zoning France Ruralités Revitalisation*, 2024/2025. URL: https://entreprendre.service-public.gouv.fr/actualites/A17460?lang=en
National Character Areas (NCAs), England	Natural England/DEFRA	National coverage, 159 landscape areas	Landscape and morphological approaches	Natural England, *National Character Areas*. URL: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-character-area-profiles-information-for-local-decision-making
Natura 2000 protected areas network	European Union, Birds Directive and Habitats Directive, implemented by Member States	Site-based protected areas, terrestrial and marine	Landscape and environmental zoning approaches	European Environment Agency, Natura 2000 data, the European network of protected sites; European Commission, Natura 2000. URL: https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/datah

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Table A1 (*continued*)

Typology/framework	Institution/project	Scale	Used in Table 1 as example of	Source/link
				ub/datahubitem-view/6fc8ad2d-195d-40f4-bdec-576e7d1268e4
DATAR-INRAE Typologie des campagnes françaises et des espaces à enjeux spécifiques	DATAR, with INRA, Cemagref/IRSTEA, ThéMA, and other research partners	Communes and cantons	Hybrid/systemic approaches; also relevant to demographic and landscape approaches	Hilal et al., *Typologie des campagnes françaises et des espaces à enjeux spécifiques*, DATAR, 2011/2012. URL: https://pos-occitanie.fr/files/pdocument/public/r1163_19_travaux_en_l_12_22032012_bd-2.pdf
FARO-EU, Foresight Analysis of Rural Areas of Europe	EU FP6 project/FARO-EU	1 km^2 grid, aggregable to administrative levels	Scenario-based/foresight-oriented differentiation; hybrid/systemic approaches	European Environment Agency. (2011). *Foresight Analysis of Rural areas Of Europe (FARO-EU) classification of rural areas*. URL: https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/maps-and-charts/classification-of-rural-areas
SHERPA foresight prospects for the future of EU rural areas	SHERPA, Horizon 2020	EU rural areas, policy/scenario level	Scenario-based/foresight-oriented differentiation	Arcuri and Brunori, *Foresight Prospects for the Future of EU Rural Areas*, SHERPA D3.4, 2023. URL: https://rural-interfaces.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/D3.4_Foresight-prospects-for-the-future-of-EU-rural-areas.pdf

Data availability

The data is already shred in an Appendix in the document.

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