

Stream #25

Territorial Inequalities and the Welfare State: The Spatial Politics of Service Delivery

Conveners:

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This stream explores the "geography of the welfare state," addressing the growing tension between the promise of universal social citizenship and the reality of decentralized service delivery. While welfare states are typically analyzed at the national level, the actual provision of critical services—from healthcare and education to social assistance and housing—is increasingly determined by subnational governments. This shift has revived the classic debate over whether decentralization acts as a "laboratory for democracy" that fosters innovation and responsiveness, or a driver of spatial stratification that deepens spatial inequality.

We invite contributions that move beyond simply documenting regional disparities to explain the institutional architectures, political dynamics, and structural forces that condition them. Why do some decentralized systems maintain high levels of equity while others fracture into deep territorial divides? How do multi-level governance structures interact with partisan politics and local economic disparities to filter the impact of local autonomy on social rights?

This stream seeks to bridge the gap between scholars of political economy, fiscal federalism, and comparative social policy. We welcome single-country case studies that unpack specific subnational dynamics, as well as cross-national comparisons that test broader theories of multi-level governance. We are particularly interested in papers that investigate not only disparities in spending but also in service quality, access, rationing mechanisms, and citizen satisfaction. By bringing together research on diverse policy domains, this stream aims to map the political and organizational logics that determine whether place becomes a barrier or a gateway to social protection.

We welcome a wide range of papers that address the intersection of space, inequality, and the welfare state. Examples of relevant topics include (but are not limited to):

- The Politics of Place: How partisan alignment and regionalist parties influence social spending and redistribution;
- Structural Transformations: The interaction between the knowledge economy, labor markets, and subnational welfare institutions;
- The Architecture of Inequality: How fiscal equalization formulas, matching grants, and legal entitlement frameworks shape local capacity;
- Administrative Burdens: How local bureaucracy and gatekeeping create spatial variation in access to benefits;
- Sectoral Dynamics: Spatial disparities in specific domains, such as healthcare access, education funding, housing policy, and long-term care;
- Outcomes and Attitudes: Studies linking regional policy variation to citizen satisfaction, trust in government, and well-being outcomes;

Urban-Rural Divides: The specific governance challenges of service delivery in peripheral or "left-behind" regions versus metropolitan growth hubs.