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EU COHESION POLICY AND THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY ON INTERGENERATIONAL FAIRNESS. FAIR PLACES, TERRITORIAL CAPABILITY AND THE EU COHESION POLICY 2028-2034

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APRESENTAÇÃO DA UMPP / UMPP PRESENTATION

A Unidade de Monitorização de Políticas Públicas (UMPP) da Universidade de Évora é uma estrutura técnica e científica dedicada à produção de conhecimento e informação sobre conceção, monitorização e avaliação de políticas públicas.

A UMPP foi criada com o apoio do Programa Operacional Regional do Alentejo 2007-2013 (INALENTEJO) e tem como objetivo principal promover a avaliação e monitorização das políticas públicas implementadas ou em processo de implementação na unidade territorial NUTS II do Alentejo, em Portugal e na União Europeia, bem como assegurar a ampla disseminação desse conhecimento neste âmbito territorial.

A competitividade dos países, das regiões e das empresas está cada vez mais dependente das condições em que uns e outras tomam decisões e as concretizam de forma eficiente e eficaz. Neste sentido, a capacidade e competência na definição e implementação de políticas públicas por parte do Estado e a assertividade na concretização de estratégias e iniciativas bem sucedidas por parte das demais organizações são hoje fatores decisivos para o desempenho das sociedades em que se inserem.

A relevância, pertinência, coerência e valor acrescentado das políticas públicas são hoje aspetos absolutamente cruciais para as condições de desenvolvimento dos países, dos territórios, das organizações e dos indivíduos. Desde logo, em função dos contextos regulamentares e de enquadramento que estabelecem, dos mecanismos de incentivo e estímulo em que assentam, dos paradigmas e visão de futuro para que apontam, do nível de sofisticação e inovação que lhe está associado e da intencionalidade estratégica que imprimem e transmitem, numa perspetiva de médio e longo prazo, aos setores e atividades a que se destinam.

Num momento em que é cada vez maior o nível de exigência técnica e científica associado ao processo de planeamento da economia, da sociedade e dos territórios, e à construção e salvaguarda das suas condições de competitividade e de desenvolvimento, a Universidade de Évora entendeu criar uma Unidade de Monitorização de Políticas Públicas dedicada à produção de conhecimento e à avaliação e monitorização de políticas públicas aplicadas, ou em processo de aplicação nesta região.

A UMPP pauta a sua atividade por princípios de rigor, isenção, transparência e responsabilidade, e uma preocupação constante de auscultação e colaboração com as entidades e agentes da região Alentejo, mas também relativamente às de âmbito nacional e internacional.

Convidamo-lo(a) a conhecer o trabalho que fazemos.

The Public Policy Monitoring Unit (UMPP) of the University of Évora is a technical and scientific unit dedicated to producing knowledge and information on the design, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies.

UMPP was established with the support of the Alentejo Regional Operational Programme 2007-2013 (INALENTEJO). Its main mission is to promote the monitoring and evaluation of public policies that have been implemented, or are currently being implemented, in the NUTS II region of Alentejo, in Portugal and the European Union while also ensuring the broad dissemination of knowledge in this field across the territory.

The competitiveness of countries, regions, and organisations increasingly depends on the conditions under which decisions are made and translated into effective and efficient action. In this context, the State's capacity to design and implement public policies, together with the ability of other organisations to deliver successful strategies and initiatives, has become a decisive factor in the performance of the societies in which they operate.

The relevance, consistency, coherence, and added value of public policies are now crucial to the development prospects of countries, territories, organisations, and individuals. This is reflected in the regulatory and institutional frameworks they establish, the incentive mechanisms on which they are built, the paradigms and future visions they promote, the degree of sophistication and innovation they embody, and the strategic direction they provide to the sectors and activities they are intended to support over the medium and long term.

At a time when the technical and scientific demands associated with planning the economy, society, and territories – and with strengthening and safeguarding their competitiveness and development – are becoming ever more complex, the University of Évora created UMPP as a dedicated unit for the production of knowledge and for the monitoring and evaluation of public policies applied, or in the process of being applied, in the region.

UMPP carries out its work in accordance with the principles of rigour, impartiality, transparency, and responsibility, while maintaining an ongoing commitment to dialogue and collaboration with institutions and stakeholders in the Alentejo region, as well as with partners at national and international level.

We invite you to explore our work.

UMPP POLICY PAPERS

Os UMPP Policy Papers são documentos síntese elaborados sobre questões de natureza metodológica, ou de debate técnico e científico, em torno de questões avaliativas ou de monitorização de políticas públicas. Os UMPP Policy Papers abordarão, entre outros aspetos, exercícios de avaliação e análise em torno de políticas ou de instrumentos de política pública concretas, e serão concebidos com a preocupação de apresentar recomendações ou propostas de orientação futura.

Esta publicação destina-se a cumprir um dos objetivos da UMPP, nomeadamente a produção de conhecimento e de informação sobre a conceção, monitorização e avaliação das políticas públicas implementadas ou em processo de implementação na Região Alentejo, em Portugal e na União Europeia, bem como promover a disseminação dessa informação no contexto regional e nacional.

O UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026 é tem como objetivo demonstrar que a coesão económica, social e territorial deve ser entendida, no quadro da reforma pós-2030 das políticas da União Europeia, como uma condição central de justiça intergeracional.

Partindo da nova Estratégia Europeia para a Justiça Intergeracional, este Policy Paper procura evidenciar que as desigualdades territoriais não são apenas assimetrias espaciais, mas também mecanismos de reprodução de desvantagens ao longo do ciclo de vida e entre gerações, propondo, por isso, uma leitura da Política de Coesão como garantia territorial de oportunidade, com particular atenção às implicações institucionais, orçamentais e de governação deste argumento para a União Europeia e para Portugal.

UMPP Policy Papers are concise publications addressing methodological issues and technical and scientific debate in the field of public policy monitoring and evaluation. Among other topics, they include evaluation and analytical exercises focusing on specific public policies or policy instruments, and are designed to present recommendations and proposals for future action.

This publication contributes to one of UMPP's core objectives: the production of knowledge and information on the design, monitoring, and evaluation of public policies implemented, or in the process of being implemented, in the Alentejo Region, while also promoting the dissemination of this knowledge at both regional and national levels.

UMPP Policy Paper No. 5 | 2026 aims to demonstrate that economic, social and territorial cohesion should be understood, within the post-2030 reform of European Union policies, as a central condition of intergenerational fairness. Building on the new European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, the paper seeks to show that territorial inequalities are not merely spatial asymmetries, but also mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced across the life cycle and between generations.

It therefore proposes a reading of cohesion policy as a territorial guarantee of opportunity, with particular attention to the institutional, budgetary and governance implications of this argument for the European Union and for Portugal.

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Abstract

This Policy Paper argues that economic, social and territorial cohesion should be recognised as a core instrument of intergenerational fairness in the post-2030 European Union policy framework. Building on the European Commission's first Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, the paper develops the argument that fairness between generations depends not only on long-term policymaking and fair opportunities, but also on fair places: the territorial conditions that shape access to education, healthcare, housing, mobility, connectivity, public services, innovation and participation. From this perspective, territorial inequalities are not merely spatial imbalances; they are mechanisms through which disadvantage may be reproduced across the life course and transmitted between generations. The Policy Paper therefore proposes a conceptual shift from cohesion as convergence alone to cohesion as a territorial guarantee of opportunity. It also examines the institutional and budgetary implications of this argument for the post-2030 reform of EU Cohesion Policy, with particular

attention to National and Regional Partnership Plans, allocation criteria, strategic foresight, territorial impact assessment, administrative capacity and multilevel governance. A dedicated section on Portugal shows how regional asymmetries, demographic pressures, implementation capacity and place-based innovation policy make the country a particularly relevant test case for understanding cohesion as a condition of intergenerational fairness. The Policy Paper concludes with a set of recommendations for the European Union, Member States and Portugal.

Executive Summary

The European Commission's first Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness creates an important opportunity for rethinking the future of EU Cohesion Policy. Its main innovation is not only to strengthen long-term thinking in EU policymaking, but also to recognise that fairness between generations depends on fair places: the territorial conditions that shape access to opportunities, services, housing, mobility, connectivity, participation and future life chances (European Commission, 2026a, 2026b).

This policy paper argues that the next logical policy step is to make explicit what is already increasingly implicit in EU policy practice: economic, social and territorial cohesion should be treated as a core instrument of intergenerational fairness. This does not require a new policy silo. It requires a stronger strategic articulation between cohesion, competitiveness, demography, housing, public services, resilience, preparedness, place-based development and future-oriented policymaking.

The paper develops five main arguments.

First, territorial inequalities should be read through a life-cycle lens. When access to education, healthcare, housing, care, mobility, connectivity and quality employment is excessively conditioned by geography, territorial disparities become mechanisms through which disadvantage is reproduced over time.

Second, cohesion should be understood not only as convergence, but also as a territorial guarantee of opportunity. A more persuasive post-2030 rationale for cohesion policy is that no generation should inherit diminished life chances because of the territory in which it was born.

Third, the post-2030 reform debate already offers several entry points for this repositioning. The emerging architecture around National and Regional Partnership Plans, competitiveness, social investment, allocation criteria, preparedness and rural development shows that the next EU budget will increasingly depend on the interaction between territorial delivery and wider strategic priorities (European Commission, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025g, 2025h, 2025i, 2025j).

Fourth, a fairness-based reading of cohesion requires stronger metrics, evidence and evaluation. Average convergence indicators remain necessary, but they are not sufficient. A

mature framework should also assess future opportunity structures, territorial capability, service accessibility, demographic resilience, housing conditions, talent retention, administrative capacity and territorial impact.

Fifth, Portugal illustrates why this reframing matters. Longstanding asymmetries between coast and interior, metropolitan and low-density territories, and more dynamic and more fragile regions are not only territorial imbalances. They are also unequal conditions for intergenerational justice. The Portuguese case therefore helps connect regional development, demographic change, public service provision, innovation capacity, administrative capability and territorial freedom of choice (Marques Santos et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2023; Tribunal de Contas, 2021).

The Policy Paper concludes with a clear claim: a Commission serious about fair places, long-term competitiveness and future-ready policymaking should treat cohesion policy not merely as a redistribution mechanism or a convergence tool, but as a practical way of delivering intergenerational fairness across territories.

Keywords

Intergerational fairness; economic, social and territorial cohesion; fair places; territorial capability; place-based policy; territorial development; multilevel governance; European Union; Portugal.

1. Introduction

The European Union has entered a new phase in the debate on intergenerational fairness. The adoption of the first European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness signals a broader shift in EU governance: policy is increasingly expected to account not only for present needs, but also for its long-term consequences for future generations (European Commission, 2026a, 2026b).

This shift matters because the Union is confronting multiple transitions at once: demographic ageing, climate pressure, digital transformation, geopolitical instability, labour-market restructuring, security pressures and uneven territorial development. In such a context, intergenerational fairness cannot be confined to questions of pensions, debt or environmental sustainability alone. It must also address how opportunities, risks and institutional capacities are distributed across territories over time (European Commission, 2024, 2026b; United Nations, 2024a, 2024b).

This is precisely where the future of Cohesion Policy becomes strategically relevant. Recent Commission thinking already points in this direction: cohesion policy is increasingly expected to support competitiveness, decarbonisation, affordable housing, water resilience, security-

related resilience and stronger territorial responsiveness, while still reducing economic, social and territorial disparities (European Commission, 2024, 2025a).

The intergenerational fairness agenda strengthens that logic. It provides a more compelling normative and policy language for explaining why territorial disparities matter. They matter not only because they weaken convergence, but because they can lock younger and future generations into structurally unequal opportunity sets.

This policy paper therefore advances a clear proposition: in the post-2030 EU policy framework, economic, social and territorial cohesion should be recognised as both an objective and an operational condition of intergenerational fairness.

That proposition is intended to be constructive and institutionally realistic. It does not require a separate cohesion pillar under the fairness agenda. Rather, it suggests that the Commission, Member States and regional actors should use intergenerational fairness as a strategic lens to sharpen the territorial relevance, legitimacy and future-readiness of cohesion policy.

The paper proceeds in five steps. It first builds a conceptual bridge between territorial cohesion and intergenerational fairness. It then situates that bridge within the long-run evolution of EU cohesion thinking and the policy shift introduced by the 2026 Strategy. Third, it examines the institutional and budgetary architecture of post-2030 Cohesion Policy, focusing on National and Regional Partnership Plans, allocation rules, performance, simplification and governance. Fourth, it discusses metrics, evidence and evaluation, arguing that a fairness-based reading of cohesion requires a stronger territorial evidence architecture. Finally, it deepens the analysis through the Portuguese case, arguing that Portugal offers a particularly relevant test case for understanding cohesion as a territorial condition of fairness across generations.

2. Conceptual framework: from territorial cohesion to intergenerational fairness

2.1. Territorial cohesion as more than convergence

Territorial cohesion has long been one of the European Union's foundational policy objectives. Successive cohesion reports have reiterated the same central insight: market integration and growth do not automatically produce balanced territorial development, and public action is needed to reduce disparities and strengthen the development potential of all regions (European Commission, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2024).

However, territorial cohesion should not be understood only as an aggregate convergence objective. The more demanding interpretation is that cohesion concerns the territorial distribution of substantive opportunity. In this reading, territorial cohesion is about whether

different places provide people with viable capabilities to learn, work, innovate, access services, care, participate and build life projects over time.

This richer understanding is fully consistent with the place-based turn in EU Regional Policy. The Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Cohesion Reports, as well as the report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy, all point towards a model in which cohesion policy must continue to reduce disparities, but do so through territorially differentiated, future-oriented and institutionally grounded strategies (European Commission, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2024; High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy, 2024).

A key implication follows. Once cohesion is seen as territorially distributed opportunity rather than only territorial averaging, the debate changes. The policy question is no longer simply whether poorer regions are catching up in GDP per capita terms. It becomes whether places are acquiring, or losing, the conditions required to sustain opportunity over time.

2.2. Intergenerational fairness as a territorial question

The European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness makes an important conceptual move. It treats fairness not only as a matter of age, distribution and temporal responsibility, but also as a matter of geography. By stating that intergenerational fairness depends on fair places, the Strategy recognises that territorial conditions influence access to education, jobs, housing, services, digital infrastructure, mobility and democratic participation (European Commission, 2026b).

This move matters because it connects two debates that have often developed in parallel: the debate on territorial inequality and the debate on intergenerational justice. Once territorial disparities are understood as inequalities in access to opportunity across the life course, it becomes harder to treat them merely as spatial imbalances. Their consequences are cumulative. They shape trajectories. They affect the conditions under which one generation transfers advantages or disadvantages to the next.

Intergenerational fairness therefore requires more than long-term thinking in the abstract. It requires territorially differentiated long-term thinking. A policy may be future-oriented in aggregate terms, yet still reproduce territorial injustice if its benefits and burdens are distributed unevenly across places.

The Strategy is explicit on this point. It states that where people live strongly influences access to education, culture, jobs, housing, services, digital infrastructure, mobility and opportunities for democratic and societal participation. It also notes that territorial disparities between urban and rural areas, cross-border regions and disadvantaged neighbourhoods can amplify inequalities over time. In this sense, fair places are not an auxiliary theme. They are a constitutive dimension of the Union's emerging intergenerational contract (European Commission, 2026b).

2.3. Life-cycle disadvantage and territorial capability

A central conceptual bridge between cohesion and intergenerational fairness lies in the notion of life-cycle disadvantage. Early disadvantages in education, housing, connectivity, mobility and access to services tend to accumulate over time. The Strategy explicitly recognises that fair opportunities are built across the life course and that disadvantages not addressed early tend to compound (European Commission, 2026b).

Territory mediates those processes. A child growing up in a place with weaker schools, fragile service provision, poorer transport links and limited digital connectivity begins life under structurally different conditions from a child in a better-endowed territory. If, later in life, the same territory also offers fewer qualified jobs, weaker institutional capacity, lower innovation density and fewer affordable housing options, territorial inequality becomes deeply embedded in the life course.

For policy purposes, this suggests a shift from a narrow focus on territorial deficits to a broader focus on territorial capability. The key question is not simply whether a territory has lower GDP per capita or weaker productivity. It is whether it has the institutional, infrastructural, social and economic capacity to sustain opportunity across generations.

This notion of territorial capability is analytically useful because it links economic development with governance, service provision, social infrastructure, innovation, resilience and future choice. It allows cohesion to be understood as more than a redistributive mechanism. It becomes a means of ensuring that territories remain capable of generating and retaining opportunity over time.

2.4. Place-based development, territorial value and future opportunity

This argument can be deepened through recent work on place-based development and territorial value. The *Handbook of Territorial and Local Development Strategies* argues that integrated territorial development requires a strategic, territorially focused, cross-sectoral and multilevel approach, especially in non-urban territories facing population decline, ageing, weaker local economies, fewer job opportunities, lower connectivity and poorer access to essential services (European Commission & Joint Research Centre, 2022).

The Handbook is especially relevant because it breaks territorial development into six building blocks: strategic capacity, territorial focus, governance, cross-sectoral integration, funding and finance, and monitoring. This is highly compatible with an intergenerational reading of cohesion. Fairness across generations is unlikely to be delivered by isolated projects. It requires strategy, institutional capacity, functional territorial thinking, citizen engagement, integrated finance and a stronger monitoring logic.

A related contribution comes from the literature on transformative territorial innovation. Jeannerat and Crevoisier (2022) argue that territorial policy should move beyond a narrow competitiveness lens and consider how territories create long-term value by combining production, consumption and living conditions. The relevance of this perspective for the present paper is that territorial development is not only about output or attraction. It is also about sustaining the conditions under which places remain socially viable, economically adaptive and normatively legitimate over time.

Torre (2025) reinforces this view by arguing that territorial development combines two dimensions that cannot be separated: production relations and modes of governance. Territorial innovation is thus not reducible to technology or clusters alone; it also depends on stakeholder coordination, institutional dynamics and the governance capacity of places. This is particularly important for intergenerational fairness, because what younger generations inherit is not only an economic base, but also a governance environment.

2.5. Life-cycle disadvantage and territorial capability

The conceptual case for linking cohesion and intergenerational fairness is not only economic. It is also democratic. The Strategy itself warns that the cost of non-action on intergenerational fairness is not only economic, but also democratic, social and environmental. When policies are perceived as insufficiently responsive to generational change, confidence in institutions can decline (European Commission, 2026b).

Territorial disparities intensify that risk. If long-term EU ambitions are experienced as territorially uneven, some communities may conclude that the promises of prosperity, sustainability and inclusion are selectively distributed. Cohesion Policy therefore has a democratic function: it helps make European long-term commitments tangible in places.

This is why a fairness-oriented reading of cohesion is politically useful. It provides a language that is both normatively stronger and more accessible than the vocabulary of convergence alone. It allows policymakers to explain that territorial disparities matter because they shape who gets access to Europe's future.

3. The evolution of the cohesion rationale: from jobs and growth to fair places

The case for reading cohesion through an intergenerational lens becomes stronger when viewed historically.

The Sixth Cohesion Report presented cohesion as a long-term investment policy supporting jobs, growth and good governance in EU regions and cities (European Commission, 2014). This framing remains important. It emphasised that cohesion policy is not merely compensatory. It is developmental, and its effectiveness depends on institutions and governance quality.

The Seventh Cohesion Report broadened the argument. It noted that while disparities had narrowed in some respects, unemployment, low public investment, poor adaptation to globalisation and digitalisation, and weak public administration remained important regional challenges. It also stressed that sustainable growth required investment in both physical and human capital and that cohesion funds often acted as a lifeline where public investment remained weak (European Commission, 2017).

The Eighth Cohesion Report advanced the debate significantly by arguing that Europe must think about cohesion "towards 2050". It highlighted shrinking regions, ageing, low accessibility, poor services, development traps, and the need to strengthen smaller cities and rural-urban linkages. Crucially, it argued that the "do no harm to cohesion" principle should be developed further so that non-cohesion policies do not unintentionally intensify territorial disparities (European Commission, 2021).

The Ninth Cohesion Report pushed the territorial message further. It acknowledged that although convergence continued in some dimensions, serious internal disparities persisted; some regions remained stuck in economic stagnation; some faced pronounced talent loss; and new challenges linked to demographic change, climate pressures, labour-market restructuring and strategic transitions required more place-sensitive responses (European Commission, 2024).

The report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy consolidated this line of reasoning. It called for a cohesion policy that remains territorially grounded while becoming more future-oriented, more supportive of competitiveness and more capable of responding to structural transformations without abandoning its core mission of reducing disparities (High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy, 2024).

Taken together, these documents show that cohesion policy has already been moving towards a broader territorial rationale. The Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness does not create this shift from scratch. It offers a more coherent normative framework for it. Fair places provide a way of translating decades of cohesion learning into a language of long-term justice, territorial opportunity and intergenerational responsibility.

4. The policy shift introduced by the European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness

The European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness is structured around three pillars: fair policymaking, fair opportunities and fair places. This architecture matters because it

broadens the meaning of fairness between generations and embeds it within mainstream EU policy thinking (European Commission, 2026b).

Fair policymaking strengthens the case for long-term thinking, foresight, impact assessment and more systematic consideration of future consequences in today's decisions.

Fair opportunities addresses cumulative disadvantage across the life course, especially in education, housing, health, employment and social protection.

Fair places introduces the territorial dimension directly: fairness between generations is shaped not only by socioeconomic background, but also by geography.

This third pillar is particularly important for cohesion policy. It implies that territory is not a neutral backdrop to economic and social development. Place structures access to education, services, jobs, housing, connectivity, mobility and democratic participation. Once that is recognised, territorial disparities can no longer be treated only as development gaps. They must also be read as fairness gaps.

For the European Commission readers, the significance of this move is threefold.

First, it creates a direct bridge between intergenerational fairness and the existing place-based rationale of cohesion policy. The Strategy points towards local and regional authorities, place-based action and long-term territorial capacity. It explicitly states that where people live strongly influences access to jobs, housing, services and participation, and that targeted place-based action is needed to support opportunity across generations (European Commission, 2026b).

Second, it supports a more operational understanding of fairness. The issue is no longer only whether current policies benefit younger people. It is whether EU and national policy frameworks allow all territories to sustain opportunity across generations.

Third, it offers an umbrella capable of connecting several policy conversations that are often treated separately: demographic decline, talent loss, housing affordability, access to services, long-term competitiveness, strategic autonomy, territorial resilience and multilevel governance.

The Strategy's planned actions reinforce this interpretation. The Intergenerational Fairness Index can help measure how inequalities in opportunities are structured across time and social groups. The future-oriented policymaking package can strengthen strategic foresight across administrations. The Demography Forum can help normalise long-term thinking about population change. The Voices of the Future initiative can reinforce the role of local and regional authorities in shaping territorial futures (European Commission, 2026b).

For cohesion policy, these are not peripheral instruments. They are potential levers for a more explicit territorial mainstreaming of intergenerational fairness.

5. Why Cohesion Policy should be read through an intergenerational lens

Cohesion Policy has traditionally been framed as a policy of convergence: reducing structural imbalances, supporting lagging regions and promoting more balanced development across the Union. That mission remains valid. However, it is no longer sufficient (European Commission, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2024).

Territorial inequalities are not only spatial. They are also temporal. When a person's access to education, healthcare, affordable housing, transport, digital connectivity, quality employment or public services depends too strongly on where they live, territorial disparities shape trajectories over the life cycle. In such cases, geography influences not only present conditions, but also future possibilities.

This is the point at which territorial inequality becomes an intergenerational issue. A territory with weaker institutional capacity, declining services, low accessibility, outmigration of young people and limited economic diversification is not simply underperforming in development terms. It is transmitting disadvantage into the future.

From this perspective, cohesion should be understood in five complementary ways.

First, as a territorial guarantee of opportunity. Cohesion should ensure that all citizens, regardless of where they live, have access to the basic conditions required to build meaningful life trajectories.

Second, as a buffer against the territorial inheritance of disadvantage. Cohesion policy should prevent places from becoming mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced across generations.

Third, as a framework for freedom of territorial choice. The right to mobility remains essential, but it should not conceal an equally important principle: people should not be forced to leave their territories because those places no longer provide viable conditions for education, work, care or participation.

Fourth, as a vehicle for policy coherence across EU priorities. A fairness-oriented reading of cohesion helps connect territorial policy with competitiveness, strategic autonomy, social investment, climate resilience, preparedness and demographic adaptation.

Fifth, as a pillar of democratic legitimacy. If territorial inequalities persist or deepen, citizens may reasonably conclude that the Union's long-term ambitions are not equally available across its territory.

This argument is not speculative. It is deeply compatible with the language of the Strategy itself, which links fair places to housing, public services, mobility, social infrastructure, digital

connectivity, social cohesion and the capacity of people to remain, return or build futures in their communities (European Commission, 2026b).

6. Architecture of Cohesion Policy after 2030: strategic, institutional and budgetary implications

6.1. Why the post-2030 debate is structurally different

The debate on post-2030 Cohesion Policy is not taking place under ordinary conditions. It is unfolding in a context shaped by overlapping transitions, mounting geopolitical pressures, the legacy of successive crises, the implementation challenges of the current programming period, and a broader reconsideration of the long-term EU budget.

In this setting, Cohesion Policy is increasingly expected to perform several functions at once: reducing disparities, supporting competitiveness, financing green and digital transitions, contributing to strategic autonomy, strengthening resilience and responding more quickly to emerging shocks (European Commission, 2024, 2025a).

This wider role raises a strategic question. How can cohesion policy remain faithful to its territorial mission while also adapting to new EU priorities? The intergenerational fairness framework offers a useful answer: by clarifying that the territorial mission is precisely what allows the Union's broader strategic ambitions to be socially legitimate and territorially sustainable over time.

6.2. National and Regional Partnership Plans and the future budget architecture

The Commission's proposals around the future EU budget indicate a move toward a more integrated architecture. The planned National and Regional Partnership Plans would bring together funds implemented by Member States and regions under a coherent strategic framework, with economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture, fisheries and security among the central components (European Commission, 2025d).

This architecture has clear potential advantages. It may improve strategic coordination, align reforms and investments more closely, create stronger links between EU priorities and territorial implementation, and simplify the overall policy landscape. It also signals that territorial delivery is not peripheral to the Union's long-term objectives, but central to them.

At the same time, the integrated model raises real risks. If the post-2027 system becomes too centralised, too flexible in a purely national sense, or too weak in territorial safeguards, the distinct rationale of cohesion policy may be diluted. The European Parliament's analysis of the

proposal is explicit on this point. It warns that the NRPP model is not underpinned by a clearly articulated intervention logic for cohesion, that place-based policy risks losing centrality, and that stronger territorial safeguards are needed, including territorial impact assessment, clearer cohesion recommendations and guidance on the "right/freedom to stay" (European Parliament, 2026).

For an intergenerational fairness perspective, this is decisive. A future-oriented budget architecture cannot be considered fair if territorial inequalities are not adequately represented in programming, implementation and evaluation.

6.3. Allocation methodologies and the territorial distribution of resources

The post-2027 debate also shows that territorial allocation remains politically and technically central. The Commission's methodology for calculating allocations to Member States under the NRPPs includes variables such as population, population at risk of poverty or social exclusion living in rural areas, GNI per capita, regional GDP per capita at NUTS 3 level, and direct payments per potentially eligible hectare, together with a cap and safety net to avoid excessive concentration or excessive reduction relative to the baseline (European Commission, 2025g).

This matters because it suggests that the future budget architecture is already incorporating a broader territorial sensitivity than classic convergence metrics alone. Yet, from an intergenerational perspective, allocation methodologies should go further. They should increasingly account for forward-looking territorial pressures such as demographic decline, service accessibility, housing stress, institutional fragility, youth outmigration and low capacity to retain talent.

The Commission's own "Cohesion at the core of EU's future" factsheet is revealing in this regard. It states that support will continue to all regions, with a minimum safeguarded for less developed regions, targeted measures for cities, rural areas, eastern border regions, islands and outermost regions, and a model based on shared management, partnership and multilevel governance (European Commission, 2025h). This provides a strong institutional basis for arguing that cohesion should remain territorially explicit even inside a more integrated budget architecture.

6.4. Competitiveness, social investment and territorial fairness

The emerging budget architecture also places stronger emphasis on competitiveness, social and skills investment, and performance. That shift is not in itself incompatible with cohesion.

Indeed, it may strengthen cohesion if competitiveness is territorially embedded and social investment is treated as a territorial condition of long-term opportunity (European Commission, 2025c, 2025e).

However, there is a clear policy risk: competitiveness agendas may privilege already stronger regions unless territorial asymmetries are actively managed. The same applies to innovation,

industrial resilience and strategic autonomy. These agendas will only strengthen the Union as a whole if they are not territorially concentrated in ways that deepen the opportunity divide between places.

This is why the fairness lens matters. It provides a normative and operational criterion for assessing whether new strategic priorities remain compatible with territorial justice.

The same logic applies to agriculture and rural development. The Commission's 2025 budget factsheet on agriculture emphasises that food security, strategic autonomy, generational renewal, prosperous rural areas and closer integration of cohesion, social and rural development funding should remain central in the next budget (European Commission, 2025i). This reinforces the argument that territorial fairness is not an isolated cohesion concern. It is central to the governance of Europe's structural transitions.

6.5. Green transition, preparedness and crisis resilience

Intergenerational fairness also reinforces the territorial dimension of the green and resilience agendas. The Joint Research Centre report *Delivering the EU Green Deal* shows that while substantial progress has been made, many targets still require acceleration and that the Union's long-term ambition is a sustainable, fair, just and climate-neutral Europe by 2050 (European Commission: Joint Research Centre, 2025).

This is directly relevant to cohesion. A green transition that is not territorially balanced can intensify intergenerational unfairness by shifting adjustment costs onto already fragile places. The JRC-DG REGIO Handbook makes the same point in more territorial terms: local and regional levels are pivotal for building resilient communities and steering development towards carbon neutrality in ways that reflect territorial specificities and local ownership (European Commission & Joint Research Centre, 2022).

Preparedness adds another layer. The Commission's 2025 budget communication on preparedness and crisis management emphasises stronger coordination, stronger funding and more consistent disaster risk management across sectors (European Commission, 2025j). A fairness-oriented cohesion policy should connect these agendas: future generations will inherit not only the results of growth strategies, but also the territorial resilience or vulnerability created by present investment choices.

6.6. Governance, simplification and administrative capacity

No persuasive post-2030 cohesion architecture can rely only on stronger strategy. It must also deliver credibly. The evidence on administrative burden, simplification and implementation remains highly relevant in this respect.

The Commission's assessment of the administrative costs and burden of CPR funds shows that proportionality remains central, digitalisation has potential but uneven benefits, gold-plating must be addressed more systematically, and future reforms should balance control with accessibility and efficiency with quality (European Commission, 2025b).

The report also argues for a stronger shift towards outcome-based management, more risk-based audits, wider use of digital tools, greater interoperability, and more knowledge-sharing across governance levels. These are not merely managerial issues. They are central to territorial fairness, because places with weaker administrative capacity face greater difficulty accessing and converting funds into long-term opportunity.

The report of the High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy makes a similar point. It argues that complexity continues to impede strategic delivery, that innovative or higher-value projects can be discouraged by compliance-heavy systems, and that simplification must be meaningful, not superficial. It also warns that repeated use of cohesion policy as an emergency instrument risks weakening its long-term mission of reducing disparities and supporting transformation (High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy, 2024).

The European Court of Auditors adds a related perspective. Its analysis of the future of cohesion policy argues that long-term strategic objectives should not be undermined by short-term crisis responses, that simplification should not come at the expense of accountability and performance, and that late legislative adoption, weak administrative capacity and competition with other instruments can worsen absorption and execution pressures (European Court of Auditors, 2025).

6.7. The risk of spatially blind strategic policy

A final institutional lesson comes from outside the EU cohesion debate but is directly relevant to it. The UK Parliament's report *Flying Blind: Innovation, Growth and the Regions* argues that national innovation policy can become spatially blind when it lacks robust regional evidence, adequate territorial metrics and a clear understanding of how growth and innovation dynamics differ across places (UK Parliament, Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, 2026).

The value of this comparative insight for EU cohesion policy is straightforward. If Europe wishes to reconcile competitiveness with territorial fairness, it cannot rely on aggregate strategic ambition alone. It must develop a stronger territorial evidence architecture, capable of identifying where policy is reinforcing already advantaged regions and where corrective, place-sensitive action is required.

7. Architecture of Cohesion Policy after 2030: strategic, institutional and budgetary implications

7.1. Why current measurement remains insufficient

If Cohesion Policy is to be interpreted as a pillar of intergenerational fairness, its measurement framework must evolve. Average convergence indicators remain useful, but

they are insufficient. GDP per capita, employment rates or aggregate productivity tell us something important about territorial performance, yet they do not fully capture the territorial distribution of opportunity over the life cycle.

A fairness-oriented cohesion framework should ask different questions. Are children and young people in all regions able to access comparable educational, digital and mobility infrastructures? Do working-age adults face territorially asymmetric access to housing, quality employment, care systems and public services? Are older people exposed to territorially differentiated risks of isolation, weak care provision or low accessibility? Are some territories systematically losing capability, population and future viability?

These are cohesion questions. They are also intergenerational fairness questions.

7.2. From output counting to future opportunity structures

A further implication concerns the relationship between outputs and long-term effects. Much cohesion monitoring still privileges financial execution, project delivery and immediate outputs. These are necessary, but they are not sufficient for a paper concerned with fairness across generations.

A more mature framework would examine whether present investment is expanding or narrowing the future opportunity structure of territories. This would include not only classic economic variables, but also service accessibility, housing affordability, connectivity, care infrastructure, demographic resilience, talent retention, innovation capacity and administrative capability.

The European Parliament's analysis of the post-2027 architecture is useful here because it argues that the future system should connect performance more clearly to strategic results and territorial effects, rather than merely administrative compliance (European Parliament, 2026). The same logic is consistent with the Commission's own move toward a stronger performance framework in the next budget cycle.

7.3. Territorial impact assessment and the "do no harm to cohesion" principle

The Eighth Cohesion Report argued that the "do no harm to cohesion" principle should be further developed (European Commission, 2021). Intergenerational fairness gives that principle a stronger operational meaning.

A territorial impact assessment worthy of the name should ask whether policies in transport, housing, education, climate, innovation, industrial strategy, preparedness or digitalisation disproportionately burden already fragile territories or restrict the future opportunity set of younger generations in those places. In that sense, territorial impact assessment is not a bureaucratic add-on. It is a practical mechanism for operationalising intergenerational fairness.

7.4. Strategic foresight as a territorial policy tool

The OECD's strategic foresight toolkit reinforces the case for treating long-term analysis as a policy capability rather than a one-off exercise (OECD, 2025). Future-ready policymaking requires scenario thinking, stress-testing, horizon scanning and structured reflection about uncertainty.

Applied to cohesion, this means that territorial development should be planned against several possible futures rather than a single baseline. Demographic decline, water stress, climate vulnerability, service reconfiguration, labour shortages, technological disruption and new mobility patterns all have spatial consequences. A fairness-based cohesion policy should therefore use foresight to anticipate where today's territorial vulnerabilities may become tomorrow's structural injustice.

7.5. A possible metric agenda for fair places

The future Intergenerational Fairness Index offers an opportunity to make this agenda more concrete. Without prejudging the Commission's methodological choices, at least five territorial dimensions deserve systematic attention.

First, access to core services: education, healthcare, long-term care, childcare and administrative services.

Second, access to enabling infrastructures: transport, broadband, digital public services and energy reliability.

Third, access to viable life-course opportunities: housing affordability, quality employment, skills provision and innovation ecosystems.

Fourth, territorial resilience: demographic sustainability, climate vulnerability, preparedness and institutional capacity.

Fifth, territorial participation: civic engagement, multilevel governance, and the ability of local actors to influence development choices.

Such a metric agenda would not replace current cohesion indicators. It would complement them by making visible the territorial conditions under which opportunity is reproduced, constrained or expanded over time.

8. Democratic legitimacy and citizen expectations

One of the most interesting recent developments for this debate comes from the European Citizens' Panel on a New European Budget Fit for Our Ambitions. Although not framed in the

vocabulary of intergenerational fairness, the Panel's recommendations align closely with the logic of fair places and territorial cohesion.

Two recommendations are particularly significant. Recommendation 4 calls for reducing regional disparities through the expansion of essential infrastructure and services, stressing that all regions - especially rural and underdeveloped areas - should have reliable access to water, electricity, healthcare, education, internet, transport and job opportunities. Recommendation 14 calls for combating rural exodus through education, jobs and housing so that young people and skilled workers can remain in or return to the countryside (European Commission, 2025f).

These recommendations are important for two reasons.

First, they show that the link between territorial inequality and future opportunity is not only a technocratic concern; it is also intelligible and compelling to citizens when presented in concrete terms.

Second, they strengthen the democratic legitimacy of a policy narrative that places territorial access to essential services, housing, jobs and infrastructure at the centre of Europe's common future.

In other words, the fair places pillar of the intergenerational fairness agenda is not only institutionally defensible. It is also socially resonant.

9. Democratic legitimacy and citizen expectations

9.1. Why Portugal matters analytically

Portugal provides a particularly relevant case for a policy paper on cohesion and intergenerational fairness. It combines long-standing regional asymmetries with a strong dependence on European funds, significant experience in place-based and Smart Specialisation approaches, persistent demographic imbalances and continuing challenges in service provision, accessibility and territorial state capacity.

For these reasons, Portugal is not only a beneficiary of cohesion policy. It is also an important laboratory for testing whether cohesion can be understood as a practical condition of intergenerational fairness.

9.2. Territorial asymmetries and unequal opportunity structures

Persistent cleavages remain between coast and interior, metropolitan areas and low-density territories, dynamic urban centres and regions marked by demographic decline, weaker accessibility and lower economic critical mass. These asymmetries are well known in the

Portuguese policy debate, but they are often framed either as development gaps or as demographic problems.

An intergenerational reading brings a different emphasis. It asks whether these territorial asymmetries are producing unequal opportunity structures over time. When younger people leave certain territories because they cannot access qualified employment, affordable housing, reliable mobility, strong public services or viable local ecosystems of innovation and opportunity, the issue is not merely economic. It is also institutional and normative.

At stake is the extent to which people enjoy real freedom of choice. A territorially unbalanced country does not provide the same capacity to build life projects across space. It generates constrained choices, asymmetric opportunities and unequal expectations about the future.

9.3. PT2020, execution and the governance of territorial fairness

The Portuguese case also highlights a second dimension: the relationship between territorial fairness and state capacity. The Tribunal de Contas audit on Portugal 2020 shows both the scale of implementation and the institutional demands attached to it. By 31 December 2020, validated EU expenditure under PT2020 had reached EUR 14.9 billion, corresponding to an execution rate of 57.5%; Portugal performed comparatively well by EU standards, but this did not eliminate broader concerns about slow absorption, late starts and implementation pressures (Tribunal de Contas, 2021).

The same report identifies recurrent issues in the design and articulation of instruments, weak alignment between programmes, measures and indicators, execution and closure risks, delays in programme start-up, and the importance of interoperable information systems from the beginning of the programming period (Tribunal de Contas, 2021).

These issues are often treated as purely administrative. They are not. In practice, weak implementation and weak capability can translate into territorially unequal outcomes. Places with stronger administrations, more experienced intermediaries and greater institutional density are better able to absorb and convert funds into long-term development gains. Places with weaker capability risk being doubly disadvantaged: first by structural conditions, and second by lower ability to benefit from corrective policy.

For this reason, an intergenerational reading of cohesion in Portugal must include administrative capacity, institutional learning and evaluation capability as core rather than peripheral concerns.

9.4. Performance, assurance and the quality of delivery

The wider European audit perspective reinforces this point. The European Court of Auditors has warned that cohesion's assurance framework remains imperfect and that implementation pressures, additional resources, and the end of eligibility periods can place further strain on Member State administrations (European Court of Auditors, 2024, 2025).

This matters for Portugal because fairness is not only about allocating funds. It is also about whether delivery systems are capable of transforming financial allocation into durable territorial capability. The stronger the pressure on systems, the greater the risk that weakly embedded or short-term expenditure takes precedence over high-quality, place-based and intergenerationally meaningful investment.

A future-oriented Portuguese cohesion agenda therefore requires more than good financial execution. It requires better monitoring, better evaluation, stronger interoperability of systems, and a stronger connection between project selection and long-term territorial value

9.5. Smart Specialisation, innovation and place-based capability

Portuguese evidence on Smart Specialisation is highly relevant here. The JRC report by Marques Santos, Edwards and Neto (2021) finds that Smart Specialisation is a place-based approach to innovation policy and that, in Portugal, support aligned with S3 priorities in 2014-2020 became more concentrated on cooperation between regions and sectors, with greater diversification of R&D and innovation funds across sectors, regions and beneficiaries.

The same report finds a positive effect of R&D and innovation subsidies on regional productivity across two programming periods and a higher rate of return in the second period, suggesting that Smart Specialisation generated an additional effect when combined with other innovation subsidies (Marques Santos et al., 2021). The journal article based on this work reaches a similar conclusion: S3 appears to improve the regional productivity effects of innovation support when embedded in broader policy mixes (Santos et al., 2023).

For the purposes of this policy paper, the key implication is broader than the specific empirical result. It suggests that place-based innovation policy can shape territorial capability, not only short-term project output. It can influence whether territories develop stronger long-term conditions for productivity, adaptation and opportunity.

This is highly relevant to intergenerational fairness. If some territories systematically fail to build innovation capacity, institutional coordination and productive diversification, they risk offering weaker future horizons to younger generations. By contrast, successful place-based innovation can strengthen the long-term viability of territories and reduce the need for forced mobility.

9.6. Low-density territories, service provision and the right to stay

Portugal also illustrates the importance of low-density territories in the fairness debate. The challenge is not only one of economic investment. It is also one of service geography, mobility, housing, connectivity and access to institutions.

The JRC-DG REGIO Handbook is particularly relevant on this point. It emphasises that non-urban territories often face population decline and ageing, weaker local economies, fewer job opportunities, lower connectivity and weaker access to essential services, and that integrated

strategies are needed to address these issues through strategic, territorial, cross-sectoral and multilevel governance approaches (European Commission & Joint Research Centre, 2022).

For Portugal, this means that the debate on the interior should move beyond compensation and towards territorial capability-building. The right to stay should not be treated as a rhetorical principle. It should be operationalised through access to schools, health and care services, transport, digital infrastructure, affordable housing, innovation ecosystems and institutional proximity.

9.7. A Portuguese agenda for cohesion as intergenerational fairness

The Portuguese case therefore supports a broader conclusion: cohesion should not be treated only as a funding mechanism for reducing territorial deficits. It should be treated as a policy architecture for building territorial capability across generations.

This implies a stronger connection between regional development, demography, education, housing, connectivity, innovation, public services and administrative capacity. It also implies that evaluation should focus not only on financial execution or immediate outputs, but on whether territories are becoming more capable of sustaining opportunity over time.

Portugal is particularly well placed to advance this argument in the European debate. It combines practical experience with cohesion policy, a strong place-based innovation trajectory, and a territorial structure in which the intergenerational stakes of regional asymmetry are especially visible.

10. Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to make the link between cohesion and intergenerational fairness more explicit, more operational and more persuasive in the context of post-2030 EU reform debates.

For the European Commission and the European Union

1. Recognise cohesion policy as a core delivery instrument of intergenerational fairness in the post-2030 EU strategic framework.

2. State clearly that territorial disparities are also fairness disparities when they restrict life chances across generations.

3. Align the future Intergenerational Fairness Index with territorial metrics, including access to services, housing, connectivity, mobility and opportunity across the life cycle.

4. Introduce an intergenerational territorial lens in post-2030 cohesion programming and evaluation, ensuring that major reforms and investments are assessed for their long-term territorial effects.

5. Embed strategic foresight more systematically in territorial policymaking, linking cohesion policy with demographic scenarios, future service provision needs and resilience planning.

6. Use the fair places pillar to strengthen the policy rationale for housing, care, mobility, digital connectivity and social infrastructure investments under cohesion policy.

7. Protect the place-based nature of cohesion policy while adapting it to strategic priorities, ensuring that competitiveness and strategic autonomy agendas do not weaken territorial balance.

8. Reinforce multilevel governance, giving local and regional authorities a structured role in shaping long-term territorial futures.

9. Subject future reforms of cohesion delivery to a proportionality test, so that performance and accountability requirements do not create avoidable barriers for weaker administrations and smaller beneficiaries.

10. Address gold-plating and uneven uptake of simplification tools more systematically, through clearer guidance, better interoperability of digital systems, stronger administrative capacity and more predictable implementation practices.

11. Develop more robust territorial impact assessment mechanisms, especially for reforms and investment packages with potentially asymmetric long-term effects across regions.

12. Preserve a strong territorial allocation logic within integrated budget architectures, including ring-fenced protection for less developed and structurally fragile territories.

For Member States and subnational authorities

13. Translate intergenerational fairness into territorial policy choices, rather than confining it to youth, ageing or demographic policy silos.

14. Develop integrated territorial responses combining housing, mobility, connectivity, skills, public services and qualified employment.

15. Use demographic projections and territorial foresight more actively in regional planning, service provision and investment prioritisation.

16. Institutionalise intergenerational participation mechanisms, ensuring that younger people and territorial stakeholders contribute to policy design, delivery and evaluation.

17. Strengthen the administrative capability of regional and local systems, especially where delivery gaps risk weakening both absorption and policy credibility.

18. Assess territorial reforms and major investments against a “future opportunity” criterion, asking whether they expand or contract the long-term opportunity structure of specific places.

For Portugal

19. Reframe the debate on the interior, demographic change and regional development through an intergenerational fairness lens.

20. Prioritise policies that expand freedom of territorial choice, enabling people not only to move, but also to stay, return and thrive.

21. Invest in territorially distributed opportunity, especially in low-density areas, through stronger public services, mobility, housing, connectivity and institutional capability.

22. Connect regional development policy more closely with talent retention and attraction strategies, particularly in territories exposed to youth outmigration and low critical mass.

23. Use public policy evaluation more systematically to assess the long-term territorial consequences of current decisions.

24. Build on Smart Specialisation and place-based innovation approaches to strengthen territorial productivity, institutional learning and future opportunity structures.

25. Treat administrative capacity as a territorial cohesion issue, especially in regions where weaker implementation capability may undermine fairness outcomes.

26. Develop stronger functional and integrated strategies for low-density territories, connecting innovation, service provision, mobility, care, housing and local governance.

11. Conclusion

The European Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness has opened an important policy window. By acknowledging that the place where people are born or live shapes access to opportunities, the European Union has already taken a significant conceptual step. The task now is to translate that insight into institutional design, budgetary choices, territorial metrics and policy delivery.

Economic, social and territorial cohesion should therefore not be treated only as a development objective or a convergence instrument. It should also be recognised as a practical condition of fairness between present and future generations.

That argument is fully consistent with the wider direction of EU policy thinking. The Commission's own agenda increasingly emphasises long-term competitiveness, talent, housing, public services, strategic foresight, resilience, preparedness, place-sensitive responses and the need for other policies to take spatial impact seriously. Intergenerational fairness gives these strands a stronger common logic and a more compelling normative basis.

A Union that allows place of birth to continue determining life chances too strongly will fall short not only on cohesion, but also on intergenerational fairness. A Union that treats cohesion as a territorial guarantee of opportunity will be better equipped to turn long-term fairness into concrete public action.

For that reason, the central message of this Policy Paper remains simple but consequential: Cohesion Policy should be understood and operationalised as a pillar of intergenerational fairness.

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