

Mapping the nexus of within country social and environmental inequalities in Europe

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the distribution of environmental quality among different socio-economic groups across and within European countries. It aspires to enrich relevant literature and foster the empirical investigation of the social dimensions of environmental policy at regional level.

The issue of environmental inequalities was at the heart of the political agenda, since the beginning of the development of international environmental policy. The focus so far has been on the differentiated contribution of developed and developing countries to global environmental degradation as well as on the inequality across countries regarding the respective cost and capacity to tackle environmental hazards. Recent studies observe a sharp increase of within country social and environmental inequalities, even though environmental inequalities between countries decreased considerably during the last decade. The EU as a whole overachieved many environmental targets related for example with CO₂ emissions and air pollution, however the performance of member countries considerably varies and the empirical knowledge on within country social and environmental disparities remains very limited.

Mapping the nexus of climate change and social inequalities, three main forms of “climate change inequalities” can be identified: a) Inequalities in terms of contribution to climate change, b) Inequalities related with uneven exposure to environmental hazards and pollution and c) Environmental policy-induced inequalities. This study focuses upon the second type of environmental inequalities. The scientific evidence -albeit limited- shows the unequal within country distribution of environmental quality among individuals and social groups, which are often defined in racial, income and social terms. Poorer and socially excluded groups are more likely to live and work in areas of poorer environmental quality. The outcome of the observed inequalities could be either the exposure of these individuals to disproportionately higher environmental hazards, accounting their contribution to environmental degradation, or limited access to basic amenities related with natural resources such as energy poverty. Therefore, income inequality is sufficient to produce differentiated environmental quality experienced by rich and poor, given its spatial variation.

Critical review of scientific evidence sheds light on some important aspects of the socio-ecological vicious cycle. A modular approach is followed, testing the association of exposure

to air pollution with different sub-sets of socioeconomic factors in 176 regions of 19 European countries during the period 2003-2013. Environmental quality is measured as the exposure to air pollution (PM2.5) at regional level (TL2). Data cover six points in time: 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012 and 2013.

The analysis clearly establishes significant regional disparities in air pollution levels and socioeconomic status in most of the European countries. Within country distribution of environmental hazards seems to be biased towards the poor. Already vulnerable population in European countries with low income and lower educational status are more likely to live in more polluted regions and be exposed to higher air pollution levels than the high income groups.

Keywords:

Environmental inequalities, Social aspects of environmental policy, Within country inequalities, Air pollution, Europe