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ECONOMIC INEQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

This article explores economic inequality as a complex societal phenomenon with both global and regional dimensions, exerting a direct impact on the trajectory of sustainable development. An interdisciplinary approach is applied, integrating economic, social, and geographical perspectives to identify the root causes and consequences of uneven distribution of material and social resources. The main objective of the research is to construct a comprehensive understanding of the spatial structure of economic inequality and to outline possible mechanisms for addressing it.

The historical foundations and root causes of inequality are examined in detail, including post-colonial legacies, inequalities in access to resources, and unequal starting conditions across countries and regions.The paper reviews major theoretical approaches to inequality – such as modernization theory, dependency theory, world-systems analysis, neoliberalism, and institutionalism — and revisits them through the lens of spatial analysis.

The importance of applying a geographical approach, which allows identifying territorial patterns of inequality and systematizing disparities on a global, national, and local scale, is substantiated. Modern methodologies for measuring inequality are considered, from classical statistical indices (Gini, Theil, Palma) to integrated indicators of sustainable development. The study demonstrates how spatial visualization tools (cartography, GIS technologies) enhance the understanding and comparison of regional contrasts.

Particular attention is paid to the consequences of economic inequality for sustainable development, including reduced social mobility, deepening poverty, declining institutional trust, rising social tensions, and unequal access to basic services. The study argues that reducing inequality is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic priority for achieving balanced and inclusive development.

Ultimately, the article validates the geographical approach as an effective tool for spatial diagnostics, strategic planning, and targeted policy-making across governance levels. Future research directions include in-depth analysis of regional case studies, exploration of the spatio-temporal dynamics of inequality, and evaluation of the effectiveness of policy instruments aimed at its mitigation.

Keywords: *economic inequality, sustainable development, geographical approach, spatial analysis, socio-economic disparities, global challenges, territorial differentiation, well-being indicators.*

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Problem definition. Economic inequality is increasingly recognized as one of the most critical global challenges of the 21st century with a growing tendency, characterized by disproportionate access to income, wealth, and essential resources both within and between countries [46]. This phenomenon affects numerous aspects of life, including education, healthcare, employment opportunities, political participation, and quality of life, thereby undermining social cohesion and sustainable development efforts worldwide.

At its core, economic inequality refers to the systemic disparities in the distribution of economic assets and opportunities among individuals, social groups, and regions. It manifests in multiple forms – vertical (between individuals and classes) and horizontal (between social categories such as gender, ethnicity, or region) – and is shaped by a wide range of structural, institutional, and historical factors.

As evidenced in recent global studies, the gap between the wealthiest and the most vulnerable populations continues to widen, especially in contexts marked by weak institutions, insufficient redistributive mechanisms, and high levels of corruption.

Geographical research has increasingly contributed to understanding this complex issue by analyzing its spatial dimensions and territorial manifestations. The geography of inequality focuses on how economic disparities vary across space, how spatial configurations amplify or mitigate inequality, and how place-based factors such as urbanization, infrastructure, labor markets, and regional policy influence the production and reproduction of inequality [40]. Geographic inequalities also reveal the intersection between economic and environmental dimensions, particularly in vulnerable regions affected by climate change, armed conflicts, or limited access to innovation and investment [22].

Furthermore, the digital divide and unequal access to technologies have created new layers of inequality, exacerbating existing gaps in productivity, education, and employability. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the fragility of social systems and deepened inequality, disproportionately affecting already marginalized communities and low-income regions [12].

From a global governance perspective, addressing economic inequality is integral to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 10 explicitly targets the reduction of inequality within and among countries, underscoring the need for inclusive economic growth, equitable access to resources, and greater social justice [40]. Therefore, a multidimensional approach to inequality – encompassing economic, geographic, social, and environmental factors – is essential for crafting effective public policies, fostering resilience, and ensuring the long-term stability and sustainability of societies [41].

As the field evolves, scholars increasingly call for a combination of methodological tools and interdisciplinary perspectives to examine economic inequality in its full complexity. This includes the development of spatial indicators, the use of disaggregated regional data, and the integration of geostatistical methods. In this context, the geographical lens becomes not only analytically valuable but also instrumental in formulating place-sensitive solutions that enhance the potential for inclusive and sustainable development.

Analysis of recent research and publications discussing the problem the author relies on. The issue of economic inequality in the context of sustainable development remains an important area of research, especially in the face of globalization and climate change. Recent studies emphasize not only the traditional macroeconomic aspects of inequality but also its spatial, behavioral, and ecological dimensions, which are crucial for achieving sustainable development goals. In this context, combining different approaches allows for a better understanding of the relationship between economic inequality, regional development, access to resources, and ecological and social challenges.

In the work by Egle Tafenau and Tiiu Paas, the relationship between regional economic inequality and economic growth in EU countries is examined. The author proposes a typology of inequality, including intra- and inter-regional disparities, which is significant for sustainable development. By analyzing GDP per capita and geographic differences, Monfort shows that inequality arising from different starting economic potentials of regions can have long-term negative consequences for growth. This study helps highlight the importance of considering spatial inequality when developing economic policies for sustainable development [37].

In the context of sustainable development, the article "Economic Inequality in Sustainable Development: Challenges and Indicators" stands out, in which the authors emphasize that economic inequality is not only a social issue but also an obstacle to achieving sustainable development. Considering various inequality indicators such as the Gini coefficient, Palma ratio, and others, the authors argue that traditional methods of measuring inequality need improvement, especially regarding geographical and ecological aspects. The article also discusses the mechanisms by which inequality affects access to resources, ecological benefits, and social services, which is crucial for formulating indicators relevant to sustainable development policies [12].

The study "Economic Inequality and the Geography of Activity Space Segregation" introduces new approaches to analyzing economic inequality by examining spatial activity segregation. Using data from mobile devices, the authors demonstrate how people's economic status limits their access to various social and economic opportunities, particularly through restricted mobility within cities. This leads to social isolation and repeated spatial barriers, affecting the lives of low-income populations. This approach highlights the importance of considering behavioral aspects of economic inequality when analyzing spatial segregation and sustainable development. [4].

Equally important is the research on the relationship between economic inequality and ecological issues in the article "Inequality and the Environment: The Economics of a Two-Headed Hydra" (Drupp, Kornek, Meya, Sager). The authors argue that inequality and environmental degradation are closely interconnected. They explore how socio-economic inequality exacerbates environmental problems, particularly through unequal access to ecological benefits and the negative impact on the environment in poorer areas. Furthermore, they show how economic inequality influences ecological behavior and political decisions, leading to social injustice in environmental matters, as demonstrated during the "yellow vests" protests in France. This study emphasizes the need for an integrated approach to developing policies that account for social justice in the context of ecological challenges [7].

In turn, the work "Geographies of Socio-Economic Inequality" (van Ham, Manley, Tammaru) summarizes current approaches to spatial socio-economic inequality, focusing on the effects of "neighborhood effects." The authors explain how socio-economic conditions in a particular neighborhood can significantly determine people's life paths, including their access to education, employment, and healthcare. This approach is crucial for understanding spatial segregation in cities, where inequality can persist and worsen across generations due to spatial barriers [42].

All these studies demonstrate that economic inequality is not only a global challenge for sustainable development but also has a distinct spatial and ecological dimension. Spatial barriers, economic segregation, and the impact on ecological policies create complex challenges for development. This approach not only deepens the understanding of economic inequality but also points to the necessity of a multi-level, interdisciplinary approach to overcoming it in the context of sustainable development.

Despite the growing attention to the issue of economic inequality in the global scientific community, several key aspects remain insufficiently addressed: territorial patterns of economic inequality at different spatial levels (local, regional, national); the relationship between institutional weakness and the intensification of economic inequality in post-Soviet countries; the impact of the digital divide as a new form of spatial inequality, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; the role of geographic analysis in the development of effective regional policies to address inequality.

This article expands the scientific discussion by offering a systematic geographical approach to understanding the spatial determinants of economic inequality, making it a significant contribution to the development of contemporary social geography.

The **purpose** of the article is to conceptualize the issue of economic inequality and explore approaches to overcoming it in the context of sustainable development, taking into account the spatial features of the phenomenon, as defined through a geographic approach. To achieve this goal, the following **tasks** were set: to outline the preconditions for the formation of economic inequality and analyze examples of its regional manifestations in contemporary conditions; to consider the definition of the concept of economic inequality and the main approaches and theories for its study; to justify the geographical dimensions of economic inequality; to systematize modern methodologies for measuring and analyzing economic inequality; to identify the main factors influencing the formation and deepening of economic inequality; to analyze the consequences of economic inequality in the context of sustainable development; to emphasize the spatial aspects of economic inequality and determine the potential of the geographic approach for studying it as a global issue.

The main material. The trajectory of economic inequality has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical forces, resulting in fluctuating levels of disparity across different regions and eras. The onset of industrialization in North-Western Europe triggered a dramatic rise in regional incomes, while vast parts of the globe, particularly in Asia and Africa, remained economically marginalized [14, 39]. This divergence deepened as industrial practices spread to Northern America, Oceania, and parts of South America, fostering uneven patterns of growth and prosperity.

Colonial exploitation and the transatlantic slave trade further entrenched systemic imbalances, creating structural barriers that persist to this day. In the United States, for instance, the legacy of slavery has had a profound and lasting impact on regional wealth distribution, concentrating resources in some areas while systematically excluding others [14]. These enduring injustices underscore how historical conditions continue to shape access to economic opportunities and limit upward mobility across generations.

In recent decades, there has been a notable shift in this narrative. A visualization of global income distribution illustrates that the incomes of the poorer half of the world population have started to rise at a pace faster than that of the wealthier half, signaling a change in the long-standing trajectory of increasing inequality [14, 39] . The rapid economic growth observed in much of Asia and Latin America during this period has been pivotal in altering the global income landscape, suggesting a move toward a less unequal distribution of wealth and resources.

Despite recent progress, economic inequality remains closely tied to broader social dynamics— particularly the disproportionate influence of wealth on political decision-making and the systemic obstacles faced by marginalized groups. Surveys consistently show that many people perceive affluent individuals as wielding excessive political power, which they identify as a key driver of enduring disparities [5, 6]. While some degree of inequality is often viewed as an inherent feature of market economies, excessive imbalances can erode social trust, fuel political polarization, and impede sustainable economic development. Historical policy decisions have also played a critical role in shaping regional divides. Industrialization strategies that prioritized select urban areas frequently neglected rural or less-developed regions, entrenching structural disadvantages. The transition from traditional to modern economic models has affected communities unevenly – intensifying the gap between prosperous urban centers and struggling rural localities [19]. Evidence suggests that regions once bolstered by industrial expansion have largely retained their economic head start, while others remain trapped in cycles of stagnation and exclusion.

Additionally, the globalization of economies has introduced new complexities to the historical context of inequality. Global economic trends, such as trade agreements and foreign direct investment, can further widen the gap between regions that are well-integrated into the global market and those that are not. This creates a scenario where regions with historical advantages tend to flourish, while marginalized areas fall further behind in the economic race [28, 37]. The ongoing examination of economic inequality also highlights the challenges faced by marginalized communities, particularly women and minorities, throughout the socio-economic spectrum. Research continues to develop, offering evidence to support policies aimed at addressing these disparities, which includes initiatives for better educational opportunities, mentorship programs, and measures against discrimination in various sectors [41]. Understanding these historical con texts is essential for formulating effective responses to the challenges posed by economic inequality today.

Economic inequality, characterized by the uneven distribution of wealth and income among individuals and groups, is deeply intertwined with various theoretical frameworks that seek to understand its causes, manifestations, and impacts [6]. These frameworks not only highlight the structural and institutional factors contributing to inequality but also incorporate spatial dimensions that reveal how geographic factors influence economic disparities.

A significant body of research emphasizes the *role of historical conditions and market dynamics in shaping inequality*. Policy choices are also crucial, as they can target structural sources of inequality across interconnected levels, such as education and labor market dynamics [29]. Furthermore, scholars argue for a comprehensive approach that integrates spatial factors into the study of inequalities, advocating for the development of multiscale models and the use of spatially referenced data [20, 44]. This perspective enables researchers to identify patterns and processes that produce inequality, particularly at subnational levels. The rise of economic globalization has transformed spatial relationships, prompting shifts in inequality patterns beginning in the early 1980s. Research in the "new economic geography" seeks to analyze the spatial character of inequality by considering economies of scale, transport costs, and resource endowments. Additionally, geographical visualization techniques, such as those developed by Professor Danny Dorling's team, are employed to examine how access to globalization processes varies among populations, thus affecting their life chances [44].

Research has identified both *global and country-specific factors* as significant contributors to economic inequality. Global factors include technological progress, globalization, and commodity price cycles, which have reshaped labor markets and economic structures. Technological advancement, for example, has increased the skill premium, favoring individuals with higher education who are better equipped to leverage new technologies. This phenomenon has led to job polarization, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, where middle-class jobs have diminished in number [13]. On the other hand, country-specific factors encompass domestic economic developments, policies related to financial integration, redistributive fiscal measures, and the liberalization and deregulation of labor and product markets, all of which play crucial roles in shaping inequality trends within nations [13]. Economic inequality is a multifaceted issue influenced by various interrelated factors. Understanding these determinants is crucial for addressing the disparities in wealth and opportunity that characterize many societies.

Intersectionality theory has emerged as a vital framework for examining the interplay of various social identities – such as race, gender, and class – In the context of economic inequality. This approach recognizes that individuals experience inequality differently based on their intersecting identities. Recent discussions have highlighted the application of intersectionality within social rights adjudication, demonstrating its relevance in understanding the complexities of economic inequality and advocating for more equitable policies [42]. The intersectionality of social identities is a critical framework for understanding economic inequality. It highlights how poverty disproportionately affects certain groups and emphasizes the need for an inclusive approach to address the multifaceted nature of inequality. By taking an intersectional lens, researchers and policymakers can better comprehend how different forms of stigma and discrimination reinforce social hierarchies and asymmetries of power, wealth, and privilege [33, 43]. This perspective is essential in ensuring that efforts to combat inequality do not inadvertently exclude marginalized groups, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds [17].

Important value of *Geographical Dimensions of Inequality*. Geographical research has provided innovative methodologies for mapping and analyzing inequality, revealing significant spatial patterns in access to resources, education, and health outcomes [21]. Such research underscores the importance of spatial analysis in understanding how geographical factors contribute to unequal opportunities and outcomes. Moreover, studies focusing on residential sorting and socio-economic segregation have illustrated how urban and regional disparities shape individual experiences and well-being [20]. The spatial analysis of economic inequality involves the examination of the distribution of economic resources and opportunities across different geographic areas and populations. Researchers utilize various geographic techniques and tools, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS), to visualize and interpret spatial data, there- by understanding the drivers of economic development and its consequences on inequality [4, 21]. Spatial inequalities are often concentrated in urban areas, significantly influencing individual outcomes in health, education, and overall well-being [20]. Studies in this field explore the spatial patterns of inequality in cities and regions, examining how these patterns evolve and the factors that contribute to socio-economic segregation. Research indicates that metropolitan areas display varying degrees of activity space segregation, revealing that individuals may experience lesser income and racial segregation in their daily routines compared to their residential spaces [10]. The role of state policies in shaping economic geography is crucial, as government actions regarding trade, investment, and infrastructure can significantly influence regional economic performance and inequalities. Addressing these spatial disparities requires a focus on improving access to resources and opportunities across different geographic scales, potentially transforming the dynamics of inequality at both local and global levels [10, 44].

At a micro-level, *symbolic interactionism* offers a lens through which to examine daily interactions and the meanings individuals ascribe to their social class positions. This perspective enriches the understanding of personal experiences and identities shaped by economic inequality, highlighting how individuals navigate and make sense of their social realities within stratified societies [17].

Income inequality is defined as the uneven distribution of income within a population. It is often accompanied by wealth inequality, further complicating the socio-economic landscape. Various measures, such as the Gini Index, are utilized to analyze income distribution across different demographics, including gender and race. The consequences of income inequality are profound, leading to financial hardships for many, persistent poverty, and a disillusioned populace that may be susceptible to social and political unrest [4, 6, 30]. The measurement of economic inequality often involves household surveys that track income or consumption expenditure. These surveys provide essential data for assessing disparities in income distribution among various demographic segments, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of inequality [16]. Researchers often focus on distributions based on gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and occupation to uncover the nuanced effects of inequality across different populations [30]. This comprehensive analysis aids policymakers in crafting targeted interventions to address the root causes and manifestations of economic inequality.

Economic inequality research employs a variety of *methodologies to measure and analyze* disparities in wealth and income across different populations. The literature on inequality measurement provides an extensive range of indices that can be used to analyze the distribution of economic resources such as income [34]. Income inequality metrics, also known as income distribution metrics, are widely utilized by social scientists to measure economic disparity. These metrics can include statistical measures such as the Lorenz curve, which graphically represents the distribution of income or wealth within a population, providing insight into the extent of inequality [26]. Inequality can be quantified through diverse indicators such as income distribution, access to resources, education levels, and health outcomes [21]. This statistical analysis allows researchers to assess how these factors vary across geographic spaces, highlighting the disparities that may exist within and between regions. The collection of data is crucial for accurate economic inequality analysis. Researchers often utilize nationally representative surveys to gather income and wealth data. Economic inequality can be explored using both graphical and mathematical approaches. These range from simplistic models that provide basic insights to more intricate methods that employ advanced statistical techniques for deeper analysis [41, 34]. The choice of methodology often depends on the specific aspects of inequality being studied and the available data. Economic inequality is a complex issue that necessitates the use of various metrics for accurate assessment and understanding. Several key indices are commonly employed to measure income and wealth disparities, each with its unique advantages and limitations (Table 1).

Socio-economic inequality, along with related concepts such as income differentiation, social stratification, polarization, and economic marginalization, is a key phenomenon that characterizes global issues of inequality and poverty [1]. This phenomenon is marked by differences in income levels, access to education, healthcare, and other social services among various population groups. The issue of socio-economic inequality attracts the attention of researchers, who define it as the disparity in income, wealth, and access to social services between different social groups; this inequality often worsens over time, particularly in the absence of effective social programs and tax reforms [31]; as a result of capitalist processes that stimulate the unequal spatial distribution of resources and opportunities; urban planning and spatial segregation are key factors that sustain this inequality [9]; the collective of human rights and freedom of choice; a just society must guarantee all citizens basic opportunities for development and participation in social and economic processes [35].

Factors Influencing Economic Inequality:

- ✓ Technological Advancements and Globalization – One significant factor contributing to economic inequality is the rapid advancement of technology and the globalization of trade. Technological innovations have increased the demand for skilled labor, widening the income gap between those with specialized skills and those without [17]. In a globalized economy, countries and regions that can leverage technology effectively tend to experience economic growth, while those that cannot often face stagnation and rising inequality [44].
- ✓ Educational Disparities – Educational attainment plays a crucial role in economic mobility and inequality. Individuals from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically have better access to quality education, which can lead to better job opportunities and higher earnings [17]. Conversely, those from lower socio-economic classes often contend with underfunded schools and limited access to educational resources, perpetuating cycles of poverty and hindering upward mobility [19].
- ✓ Political Influence and Policy Decisions – Political factors, including the influence of wealthy individuals and organizations, significantly impact economic inequality. A majority of people surveyed in various countries attribute economic inequality, at least in part, to rich individuals wielding excessive political power. Policy decisions, such as tax regulations and welfare programs, can either mitigate or exacerbate inequality. Progressive taxation and robust social welfare systems can help redistribute wealth, but their effectiveness is often contingent upon political will and public support [17].
- ✓ Economic Structure and Employment Trends – The structure of the economy also shapes patterns of inequality. For example, long-term shifts towards a knowledge-based economy have disproportionately affected employment in rural and nonmetro areas, where industries like agriculture and manufacturing have traditionally dominated [19]. This shift has led to significant employment challenges for less-educated workers in these regions, while opportunities in metro areas have expanded, contributing to a growing divide in economic prosperity [19].
- ✓ Social Class and Life Trajectory – Social class remains a powerful determinant of individual life chances. The social class into which one is born often dictates factors such as access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities. Upper-class individuals tend to benefit from resources and networks that facilitate their success, while those from lower-class backgrounds frequently encounter systemic obstacles that limit their potential for advancement [17].
- ✓ Intersectionality of Inequality Factors – It is essential to recognize that economic inequality does not

result from any single factor but rather from the intersection of various elements, including race, gender, and geographic location. Policy frameworks often reflect and reinforce these inequalities, shaping the experiences of different demographic groups [38]. Addressing economic inequality thus requires a comprehensive approach that considers these intersecting influences to promote equity and opportunity for all.

Table 1

Key indices for Measuring Economic Inequality *[21, 26, 34, 46]*

	Content	Advantages	Limitations
Gini Coefficient	widely used measure derived from the Lorenz Curve, which plots the cumulative percentage of total income against the cumulative percentage of the population. The further the Lorenz curve deviates from the line of perfect equality, the greater the inequality, with the Gini Index ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality).	Simplicity: The Gini Coefficient is easy to calculate and interpret, making it a popular choice among policymakers and economists. Global Comparisons: Its ease of understanding facilitates comparisons of inequality across different countries.	Lack of Detail: While the Gini Coefficient indicates the level of inequality, it does not elucidate the nature of disparities – whether they stem from income or wealth differences, nor does it address variations across demographic groups.
Palma Ratio	focuses specifically on the extremes of income distribution by comparing the share of income or wealth held by the top 10% of the population to that of the bottom 40%. This metric is particularly significant as it highlights the disparities between the wealthiest and the poorest segments, positing that the middle class remains relatively stable and does not drive overall inequality.	Targeted Focus: By concentrating on the richest and poorest, the Palma Ratio provides a more direct view of inequality among the extremes. Ease of Calculation: Its straightforward formula allows for quick computation and understanding.	Middle Class Ignored: The Palma Ratio pays little attention to the income distribution of the middle class, which can overlook important trends within this demographic. Partial Perspective: It does not reflect the overall inequality across the entire population, focusing solely on the extremes.
Theil Index	an entropy-based measure that quantifies inequality by evaluating the level of "disorder" in income distribution. It calculates the logarithmic differences between each individual's income and the average income, assigning more weight to larger disparities. The index ranges from 0 to infinity, with higher values indicating greater inequality.	Sensitivity to Disparities: The Theil Index is more responsive to variations in the higher income spectrum compared to other measures, providing a nuanced perspective on economic inequality.	Complex Calculation: The calculation process can be more intricate than that of the Gini Coefficient or Palma Ratio, which may deter some users from utilizing this metric.

Inequality, in its broadest sense, refers to a condition in which individuals or groups experience unequal access to limited resources. Within the framework of socio-geographical research, socio-economic inequality is analyzed through the spatial distribution of key indicators and their interaction with natural conditions and economic structures.

The roots of socio-economic inequality are multifaceted. Historical legacies often shape a region's present-day economic performance, as past development trajectories influence access to infrastructure, institutions, and opportunities. Economic determinants – such as national policy frameworks, investment climate, inflation, and unemployment – directly affect income levels and living standards. Educational disparities also play a crucial role: limited access to quality education remains a significant barrier to social mobility and poverty reduction. In addition, political factors and governance practices further influence the distribution of resources and opportunities across regions [15, 18].

<u>*Economic inequality has far-reaching implications*</u> that affect not only individuals but also societies as a whole. The consequences are multifaceted, spanning health, social cohesion, and economic growth. The correlation between economic inequality and health outcomes is significant. Higher levels of income disparity are associated with increased rates of both mental and physical health issues, including higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy [23]. In societies with greater inequality, citizens often experience poorer access to healthcare and social services, which further exacerbates these health disparities [8]. Economic divides can severely impact social cohesion within communities. When wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, it can lead to social fragmentation, eroding trust and solidarity among different social groups [17, 23]. This fragmentation is often reflected in lower levels of civic participation and social engagement, particularly among vulnerable populations who may feel marginalized [4, 8, 42]. The implications of economic inequality extend into the realm of econom-

ic growth. Research indicates that high levels of inequality can impede growth in poorer countries while encouraging growth in wealthier regions. Initiatives aimed at reducing inequality, such as educational policies and wealth redistribution mechanisms, have been shown to promote overall economic health by enhancing opportunities for all individuals to participate in the economy. Moreover, studies suggest that the relationship between income inequality and economic growth is mediated by the level of equality of opportunity, particularly as influenced by intergenerational mobility [17]. When opportunities are equally accessible, economic growth tends to be more robust and sustainable.

In geographical view, the *spatial dimensions of economic inequality* warrant attention. Living in deprived neighborhoods can adversely affect individual outcomes, extending beyond personal characteristics such as education level. This concept, known as neighborhood effects, highlights how the residential context can significantly influence a range of life outcomes, including educational achievement and economic mobility [20]. Policies aimed at addressing these spatial disparities are crucial for promoting equitable growth. Investments in education, public services, and infrastructure in under-resourced areas can help bridge the rural-urban divide and foster inclusive growth [45]. A critical aspect of economic inequality is the *urban-rural divide,* with large metropolitan areas often exhibiting significantly higher average incomes compared to rural regions [4, 8]. For instance, job market concentration in urban areas facilitates access to high-paying sectors like technology and finance, while rural areas may be limited to lower-paying industries such as agriculture. This disparity emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategies that engage both urban and rural actors in addressing issues such as education, transportation, and economic development to bridge the inequality gap [27]. The relationship between *income inequality and affordability in cities* has been a focal point of geographical research. Data indicates that cities with high-income disparities often lie within metropolitan areas that reflect similar trends, suggesting a strong interconnectedness between urban centers and their surrounding regions. Importance of regional collaboration among policymakers to address the systemic causes of inequality that extend beyond city borders [27]. Despite the higher rates of poverty *in rural areas,* income inequality tends to be lower than in urban centers, as top incomes are predominantly earned in cities. Nevertheless, rural communities face significant challenges, including limited access to resources and opportunities for economic mobility. As economic forces driving growth can simultaneously increase inequality, it is crucial for rural development policies to account for both local conditions and broader economic trends, ensuring that the benefits of growth are equitably distributed across all demographics [43]. Governments face a challenging task in selecting their policy combinations to address economic inequality. The *decision-making process* can be fraught with difficulty, as certain groups may experience short-term losses that they may not recover from promptly. Nonetheless, there exist tools and strategies that could provide long-term benefits, including accelerated economic growth, more significant poverty reduction, and diminished inequality. Failing to leverage these instruments would be a considerable error on the part of policymakers [4].

Economic inequality has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the mere financial disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished [25]. This issue has profound implications for social stability, economic growth, and environmental sustainability, thereby posing significant challenges to sustainable development (Table 2).

Addressing the consequences of economic inequality necessitates international co- operation, as this issue transcends national borders [36]. Collective action is essential for developing effective policies aimed at reducing inequality, promoting equitable resource distribution, and fostering sustainable economic growth. Global initiatives, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), underscore the importance of collaborative efforts to tackle the multi-faceted challenges posed by economic inequality and its consequences [3].

Economic inequality is increasingly recognized as a significant global challenge that impacts sustainable development efforts worldwide. It encompasses disparities in income, wealth, and access to resources and opportunities, contributing to social and economic instability. Sustainable development is inherently linked to addressing economic inequality, as it encompasses not only economic growth but also social and environmental dimensions.

Sustainable development requires an inclusive approach that ensures equitable opportunities for all individuals. This includes the elimination of poverty and famine, the reduction of inequality, and the provision of equal opportunities across different socioeconomic groups. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) explicitly highlight the importance of reducing inequalities, with Goal 1 aiming to end poverty in all its forms everywhere, which is fundamentally dependent on robust economic systems capable of providing opportunities for marginalized populations [36]. To combat economic inequality effectively, strategies must be employed that foster inclusive economic growth, such as promoting decent work and encouraging innovation and infrastructure development. Businesses also play a crucial role in this context by adopting sustainable practices that reduce their environmental impact while contributing to economic growth. This holistic approach is essential for creating a more equitable and sustainable future, ensuring that the benefits of economic progress are shared broadly rather than concentrated in the hands of a few [32]. Addressing economic inequality is not just a moral imperative; it is a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development and ensuring a prosperous future for all [2]. International bodies, particularly within the United Nations framework, have recognized the urgency of addressing economic inequalities as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, SDG 10 aims to "reduce inequality within and among countries". The High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development has been identified as a critical platform for monitoring and enhancing accountability mechanisms related to this goal [7, 40].

Table 2

Consequences of Economic Inequality in Sustainable development context [3, 11, 24, 36,]

Social Consequences	Economic Consequences	Environmental Consequences
The widening gap between the rich and the poor often leads to increased social tensions and unrest. Economic inequality is linked to higher crime rates, as marginalized communities may resort to illegal means to survive when they face limited economic opportunities. Moreover, unequal access to resources, including education and healthcare, exacerbates social mobility issues, entrenching poverty for future generations. The lack of equitable access to education limits the potential for individuals to improve their socioeconomic status, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement.	From an economic perspective, high levels of inequality can hinder overall economic growth. Wealth concentrated in the hands of a few can result in reduced consumer spending, as the affluent are less likely to spend a significant proportion of their income compared to lower-income households. Additionally, economic inequality can stifle innovation and productivity growth, as a lack of access to education and technology for lower-income individuals limits the potential workforce's capabilities. Research indicates that countries with high levels of inequality often experience slower economic growth due to these barriers.	Economic inequality also has implications for environmental sustainability. Disadvantaged communities frequently bear the brunt of environmental degradation, facing higher exposure to pollution and fewer resources to adapt to climate change impacts. Furthermore, the unequal distribution of wealth leads to unequal consumption patterns, where the affluent contribute disproportionately to environmental harm through higher levels of consumption and waste generation. This disparity complicates efforts to promote sustainable development, as policies must address both economic and environmental equity to be effective.

In recent years, *research on economic inequality* has increasingly focused on its spatial dimensions, particularly in relation to rural-urban disparities. Scholars have highlighted that technological advancements, such as digital connectivity, present both challenges and opportunities for bridging these divides [4]. Rural areas often lack the necessary infrastructure and skills to adapt to global economic trends, which can exacerbate existing inequalities. Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the importance of balanced regional development as governments worldwide intensify efforts to address these disparities [4, 40]. As discussions about economic inequality continue to evolve, researchers advocate for policies that prioritize equity, such as targeted reductions in social benefits and increased taxes on wealth, which can address the systemic roots of inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the urgent need for such reforms, as it has disproportionately impacted low-income communities and threatened previous gains in reducing global inequality [41]. The ongoing debates suggest that ad- dressing economic inequality will require a multifaceted approach that includes public health considerations, societal attitudes, and structural reforms aimed at creating more equitable systems. Research into economic inequality is increasingly focusing on the systemic barriers faced by disadvantaged minorities and women throughout various sectors, particularly within the innovation curve of society and the economy. Studies indicate that addressing these issues is critical for creating equitable opportunities and fostering inclusive growth. Current investigations suggest that while the field is still developing, there is promising evidence that could inform policy changes aimed at mitigating these disparities [14].

Future research should aim to adopt more nuanced methodologies that consider the interplay between between- and within-country inequalities. There is an urgent need for studies that examine the impacts of economic globalization on inequality, moving beyond aggregate economic indicators to investigate the implications of inequality at the individual level. The ongoing shifts in global inequality patterns, termed the "inequality transition," present a pivotal area for further exploration. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to a more holistic understanding of economic inequality and inform policies aimed at fostering equitable development across diverse geographies. The application of the tools of social geography will enable a comprehensive study of socio-economic inequality, the identification of preconditions and factors for its formation, the characteristics of its manifestations, the search for mechanisms to address pressing issues, and more. Therefore, socio-economic inequality is a complex phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach to its study and resolution. Socio-geographical research provides valuable information for understanding the spatial features of inequality and developing effective strategies to overcome it.

Conclusions. The study has demonstrated that economic inequality remains a persistent and multidimensional global challenge that directly affects the implementation of sustainable development goals. The conceptualization of economic inequality reveals its complex nature, shaped by both historical and contemporary factors, including globalization, uneven access to resources, institutional inefficiencies, and structural disparities within and between countries.

Through the application of a geographical approach, the study substantiates the spatial differentiation of economic inequality, highlighting significant disparities not only between global North and South but also within national territories. These spatial characteristics underscore the importance of considering territorial factors in both the diagnosis of inequality and the development of policy responses.

The analysis of methodological tools confirmed the growing importance of spatial data, cartographic modeling, and integrated indices in monitoring inequality at different scales. Regional manifestations of inequality were illustrated using relevant indicators, proving the close interdependence between economic conditions, social structures, and environmental limitations.

Key factors contributing to the formation and deepening of inequality were identified, such as income distribution imbalances, unequal access to education and healthcare, labor market segmentation, and insufficient institutional regulation. The study also emphasized the detrimental consequences of economic inequality for sustainable development, including increased social tension, reduced economic mobility, and weakened social cohesion.

The findings confirm the relevance and potential of the geographic approach for a more holistic understanding of inequality as a spatial and systemic phenomenon. Future research should expand the spatial-temporal scale of analysis and focus on evaluating the effectiveness of territorial policies aimed at reducing inequality while promoting sustainability.

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ЕКОНОМІЧНА НЕРІВНІСТЬ У КОНТЕКСТІ СТАЛОГО РОЗВИТКУ: ГЕОГРАФІЧНИЙ ПІДХІД

У статті досліджується економічна нерівність як складне суспільне явище з глобальними та регіональними вимірами, що безпосередньо впливає на траєкторію сталого розвитку. В роботі застосовано міждисциплінарний підхід, який інтегрує економічні, соціальні та географічні перспективи з метою виявлення першопричин і наслідків нерівномірного розподілу матеріальних і соціальних ресурсів. Метою дослідження є формування цілісного уявлення про просторову структуру економічної нерівності та окреслення можливих механізмів її подолання.

Детально проаналізовано історичні передумови та першопричини нерівності, зокрема постколоніальну спадщину, нерівний доступ до ресурсів та асиметричні стартові умови в різних країнах і регіонах. Розглянуто основні теоретичні підходи до проблеми нерівності – теорію модернізації, теорію залежності, аналіз світосистем, неолібералізм і інституціоналізм – крізь призму просторового аналізу.

Обґрунтовано важливість географічного підходу, який дає змогу виявляти територіальні закономірності нерівності та систематизувати просторові диспропорції на глобальному, національному та локальному рівнях. Проаналізовано сучасні методи вимірювання нерівності – від класичних статистичних індексів (Джині, Тейла, Пальма) до інтегрованих індикаторів сталого розвитку. Проаналізовано можливості інструментів просторової візуалізації (картографія, геоінформаційні технології) для сприяння глибшому розумінню та порівнянню регіональних контрастів.

Особливу увагу приділено наслідкам економічної нерівності для сталого розвитку, зокрема зниженню соціальної мобільності, поглибленню бідності, падінню довіри до інституцій, зростанню соціальної напруги та нерівному доступу до базових послуг. Доведено, що зменшення нерівності є не лише моральним імперативом, а й стратегічним пріоритетом досягнення збалансованого та інклюзивного розвитку.

Зрештою, обґрунтовано ефективність географічного підходу як інструменту просторової діагностики, стратегічного планування та цілеспрямованого формування політики на різних рівнях управління. Перспективні напрями подальших досліджень включають поглиблений аналіз регіональних кейсів, вивчення просторово-часової динаміки нерівності та оцінку ефективності політичних інструментів щодо її подолання.

Ключові слова: *економічна нерівність, сталий розвиток, географічний підхід, просторовий аналіз, соціально-економічні диспропорції, глобальні виклики, територіальна диференціація, індикатори добробуту.*

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