

Small and medium-sized towns: role and policy challenges in a globalized world

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During the last decades, metropolises and large city-regions around the world have been considered by many scholars and policymakers as the main drivers of development (Friedmann, 1986; World Bank, 2009). Within the context of the current economic slowdown in many countries, large cities are seen again as catalysts. Economists claim that urban location advantages augment when the city size increases due to externalities that stem from investments in public services, large markets of outputs, and large and diversified markets of inputs. In contrast, small and medium-sized towns have been left aside and far less a subject of a scientific discussion (Bell and Jayne, 2009). But critical views have emerged. For instance, J. Robinson (2002) argues that urban research has been dominated by studies on large cities in developed countries. Through the concept of “ordinary cities”, she claims that all cities, regardless of their size or location, show dynamic and innovative aspects; and at the same time they face constraints and challenges. In the global South, it seems important to explore the role of small towns within rapid urbanization. On other continents, and especially in Europe, how can secondary towns contribute to territorial cohesion, for instance in rural and peripheral regions undergoing ageing and depopulation? Another challenge currently faced by many small and medium-sized towns is their dwindling financial resources, which, in turn, makes municipalities

vulnerable to political pressure. So far, there is little detailed research available on this topic. Small, medium-sized, second towns or intermediate cities can prove to be dynamic. They perform diverse functional roles: manufacturing towns, communication nodes, touristic places, university towns... (Bolay and Rabinovich, 2004). The town's economic performance (positive or negative) is not necessarily determined by size. Besides, the dynamism can also be social. Bitoun (2006) notes that there are "cities of social responsibility", that is, that respond to social demands. This can occur in areas where urbanization is thin and where there is no metropolis. Any cross-national comparison of small and medium-sized towns shows a huge variety of definitions. Brunet (1997, p. 188) wrote that the medium-sized town is an "unidentified real object", meaning that such places are undeniably a stratum of the urban system while it is hard to define them by standardized criteria. Most authors use the size of the population as a reference, but nevertheless, a lower limit for identifying a "small town" is 250 inhabitants in Denmark, 5,000 in Austria and 30,000 in Japan (Servillo et al., 2014). The approach by the size may not be enough: it is too closely associated to the idea of urban hierarchy. In a globalizing world, relations between cities can also be horizontal and transverse (between different urban systems), showing that the hierarchy is combined with urban heterarchy (Sposito and Catelan, 2014). This session brings together a number of contributions dealing with small and medium sized towns in various national and continental contexts. It is open to planners, geographers or regional scientists presenting conceptual developments, research results and critical policy messages on the following and other related topics: - The social and cultural capital of small and medium sized towns - The new roles of medium and small cities in the globalization period - Small and medium towns in the orbit of metropolitan systems: commuting, tourism, and the knowledge economy - Can planning (and what type of planning) make a difference in terms of performance? Session organizers: Christophe Demazière, University of Tours, France Maria Encarnação Beltrão Sposito, University Prudente, Brazil References BELL D., JAYNE M. (2009) Small Cities? Towards a Research Agenda. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, 22 (3), 683-99. BITOUN J. (2006) Observar em redes: implicações políticas, geopolíticas e técnico-científicas, Conference held in "Seminário Internacional Cidades na

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