1 Introduction to *A Research Agenda for Small and Medium-Sized Towns*

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In many countries across the world, small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs) play an important role in the urban system. Yet, they are often overlooked and undervalued when compared to large cities. In recent years, however, scholarly attention towards SMSTs has increased, and this work has led to a myriad of findings that encourage us to rethink some consolidated concepts and theories about urban development. For example, SMSTs in many European regions have enjoyed robust development in recent years, and in some areas they have experienced more promising economic and demographic trajectories in comparison to large cities (Dijkstra et al., 2013; McCann and Acs, 2011; Servillo et al., 2014). Insights have emerged that there is no straightforward connection between city size and economic growth (Camagni et al., 2015; Frick and Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Highly innovative companies – so-called "hidden champions" – are often located in SMSTs and they manage to be innovative from these locations, suggesting that the small town environment is capable of nourishing the innovation capacity of these firms (Leibniz Institut für Länderkunde, 2018; Meili, 2019). Some studies have highlighted their potential in terms of fostering an enriching cultural and creative environment (Lorentzen and van Heur, 2012). Furthermore, when confronted with industrial decline, SMSTs develop a surprising level of resilience when they are able to emerge from lock-in situations through a cognizant understanding of changes, proactive interventions and projects that renew their industrial heritage (Lazzeroni, 2020). Actors in SMSTs across the world show a strong determination to build grassroots movements and networks around sustainability and quality of life, as shown for example by the propagation of transnational initiatives such as slow cities, transition towns or fair trade towns (Knox and Mayer, 2009).

This book therefore invites readers to explore this generally underappreciated urban type and to focus on various aspects of SMSTs. Definitions of SMSTs

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– particularly with regard to size – vary greatly, but a commonly accepted definition is the one used by the ESPON TOWN project (Servillo et al., 2014). This definition includes towns that range from 5,000 to 50,000 inhabitants and is integrated by other variables such as population density, functional equipment, production specialization and administrative hierarchical levels. However, it is necessary to broaden the reflection about the definition of SMSTs, considering, in addition to the demographic and functional aspects, other interpretative dimensions, such as those of a relational and cultural nature. The notion of a small town should therefore be redefined based on the system of relationships it possesses and the variety of interactions and forms of interdependence that it can develop with large cities and other centers. Furthermore, as Garrett-Petts (2005) underlines, it is necessary to think of SMSTs not so much in comparative terms with respect to large cities, but in their ability to be home to an urban habitus and a positive attitude to cityness (openness, attractiveness, sense of place, regeneration, creativity, etc.).

Within the span of only two decades, SMSTs have emerged on the agenda of researchers and policymakers. Early work focused on the urban experience in SMSTs from a variety of perspectives, including political, economic, social and cultural features (Bell and Jayne, 2006; Knox and Mayer, 2009; Ofori-Amoah, 2007). These mostly descriptive accounts were complemented by systematic and comparative assessments of SMSTs, primarily in the context of the Global North. In Europe, for example, the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) initiated a large-scale research project, for which researchers from across Europe examined the role and function of SMSTs in polycentric development. The project was entitled TOWN and it was among the first comprehensive studies that shed light on the distribution and specialization patterns of SMSTs in Europe (Servillo et al., 2014, 2017). Similar research, yet neither as comprehensive in terms of its breadth and depth nor as influential on policymakers, was undertaken in the United States (Erickcek and McKinney, 2006). However, there has been a strong tradition of research in the United States about small town economies, particularly with regard to downtown development (for an overview, please see the introductory chapter in Bell and Jayne, 2006). Research in the Global South on the role of SMSTs remains scant and focused on individual countries or specific topics (Mainet and Racaud, 2015; Nel and Rogerson, 2018).

These various research activities have left their mark on policymaking. In recent years, SMSTs have been put on the map of national and regional policymakers. In Germany, for example, research insights on small cities (Steinführer et al., 2021) have been taken up by a range of federal initiatives, including an effort to coach and network policymakers in small towns through what they call

a *Kleinstadtakademie*. In Switzerland, there are efforts to strengthen climate action in Alpine towns within the framework of the international treaty to promote sustainable development in the Alpine region. Many more efforts are under way in countries like Sweden, Norway, Poland and Finland (Georgieva and Mcmaster, 2022). In Italy, there is an ongoing debate, on the one hand, on the ferment of intermediate cities and, on the other, on the decline trends of small towns located in peripheral areas that are objects of the National Strategy of Internal Areas (until 2012), developed from the place-based approach proposed for cohesion policies (Barca, 2019).

For this book, we invited leading scholars in urban studies and geography to explore current debates around SMSTs. We encouraged them to think about the implications of their research for SMSTs. The contributions map out an agenda for research, theory and policy practice about the role and function of SMSTs in various contexts and at different territorial scales. Focusing on a broad set of topics, we encouraged critical thinking about the ways in which SMSTs develop also in relation to large ones. We encouraged them to critically go beyond the "urban bias" and thereby consider the context of SMSTs for the application of various topics and research perspectives. The scholars involved in this book have focused their contributions on the trends and characterizations of SMSTs, located especially in the European context and in part in the American, where their population size is larger than in Europe. Therefore, points of view and analyses from the Global South are absent, that is, areas where the link between the urban dimension and economic performance is probably more evident than what emerges on the European continent and where SMSTs could play a more significant role within urban hierarchies.

The chapters in this book advance our understanding of SMSTs both in a pragmatic and a conceptual manner. What emerges is a nuanced understanding of SMSTs, especially in terms of their position in relation to larger cities and within metropolitan areas (Meijers et al., 2018), but also in terms of implications related to their size. The chapters invite us to go beyond the so-called "urban bias" (Lipton, 1984; Shearmur, 2017) by starting a discussion about theories and concepts that originate from research on SMSTs. Rather than applying theories and concepts that were developed in the most successful urban places, the chapters call for a more nuanced understanding of SMSTs. Thus, each contribution represents a call for future research and includes thought-provoking questions.

This research agenda begins in Chapter 2 with an important contribution by Annett Steinführer on socio-spatial identities in SMSTs. She convincingly outlines the tensions between urban and rural identities that lead to a nuanced

conceptualization of SMSTs as places that need to be understood beyond population size and morphological, functional, social and administrative characteristics. Rather, Steinführer calls for a sensitized point of view that places SMSTs along the urban–rural continuum.

The argument by Evert Meijers and Martijn Burger in Chapter 3 is logical and convincing: SMSTs strongly depend on their position in the network of cities. Considering SMSTs as being part of larger networks leads us to rethink the ways in which smaller urban places benefit or are hampered by their closeness to larger metropolitan areas. Applying the concepts of "borrowing size" and "agglomeration shadow," they first develop a framework and then illustrate how this framework could be applied in future research.

In Chapter 4, Christophe Demazière proposes a line of investigation that focuses on urbanization and suburbanization processes and their implications for SMSTs. By looking at the case of France where the dynamics of urban sprawl challenge large urban agglomerations, Demazière illustrates how questions related to territorial development and SMSTs should be at the forefront of future research. His contribution also highlights the role national policy plays in either forgetting smaller urban places or the more recent attention that they have gained.

Michela Lazzeroni, in Chapter 5, provides an interesting examination of the concept of resilience and how it applies to SMSTs. After defining the concept, she goes into depth in terms of factors that are important for resilience in small towns, namely dynamic capabilities, contextual factors and institutions. What is clear from her contribution is that developing resilient SMSTs is not easy and prone to ups and downs that are determined by outside influences such as digitalization. Given the dynamic notion of the concept of resilience, there are numerous avenues research could take (e.g. how actors in SMSTs react to recent crises situations emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic).

In Chapter 6, Heike Mayer calls for a much more nuanced approach to the study of innovation and entrepreneurship in SMSTs. These economic dynamics are probably the ones that are most affected by the urban bias and existing research often takes on a distorted view of what it takes to become or be an innovative and entrepreneurial city/town. This bias could be averted if researchers conceptualize smallness in terms of the diversity of actors, their capabilities, their connections and their ability to develop all kinds of innovative solutions. Mayer calls for future research that considers the unique small town innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Many SMSTs specialize in industrial production. In Chapter 7, David Bole helps us to view industrialism and associated cultures as an opportunity and not as a barrier to future development. Industrial development ought to also be seen in an evolutionary manner in terms of transformation, resilience, agency, etc. His main message is to see industry in SMSTs not only as a context or background, but rather as a characteristic that shapes the community, culture, evolution, etc. of SMSTs.

In Chapter 8, Chiara Rabbiosi and Dimitri Ioannides examine cultural tourism as a way to develop SMSTs. They identify a clear research gap in the literature on tourism when it comes to SMSTs. While there is a lot of research that has examined the role of tourism in rural and peripheral regions, less is written about SMSTs or what is written seems to be all over the map in terms of the size of the communities in question. Yet, particularly cultural tourism is a topic that has a lot of potential when it comes to SMSTs. SMSTs have emerged as cultural tourist destinations and future research ought to examine associated opportunities and implications.

Digitalization and the rise of "smart cities" are topics which are not only relevant for large cities, but increasingly also for SMSTs. In Chapter 9, Koen Salemink explores the implications of these trends for SMSTs and argues that these urban-led developments resulted in technology-push policies that may not be appropriate for smaller places. He calls for the early engagement of scholars who study digitalization and for them to not only follow an urban agenda, but to engage with small town communities and to discuss their needs and desires.

Timothy Beatley turns to the role of nature in SMSTs in Chapter 10. He presents ideas about smaller biophilic cities that put nature at the center of development. He presents selected cases of smaller cities from the Biophilic Cities Network and illustrates how they implement projects such as nature centers, visions such as carbon neutrality and biodiversity conservation. Each city has a unique history of establishing programs with nature at the core. Beatley presents a research field that is open and ripe with questions such as whether smaller cities are nimbler with regards to implementing biophilic policy implications.

Policy plays a key role in the chapter written by David Kaufmann and Stefan Wittwer. In Chapter 11, they argue that SMSTs can pursue different strategies when it comes to public policymaking. They examine three steps in the policymaking process (design, implementation and impact) and for each step highlight interesting research questions. Their argument is also that we

need to broaden our studies to not only examine policymaking in the realm of economic and spatial development, but also examine policies related to sustainability, social justice, citizenship, democracy, etc.

In Chapter 12, Arnault Morisson invites us to take on the perspective of agents who change the fortunes of SMSTs. These are actors who take decisions and make sure things happen. Agents of change is the concept that he applies to the SMST context and which focuses on the role of human agency. He argues that different types of agents of change take on different roles at different stages. We particularly lack an understanding of the ways in which different types of agents of change are interrelated.

In the final and concluding chapter, we illustrate a possible road ahead and highlight a number of avenues for how the research agenda for small and medium-sized development can be shaped in the future. We pay particular attention to the role of uneven development and the need to develop a coherent set of concepts and theories. The chapters in this book promise a rich engagement with smaller urban places. We look forward to the questions identified by the authors, but also the questions that will emerge in the coming years.

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